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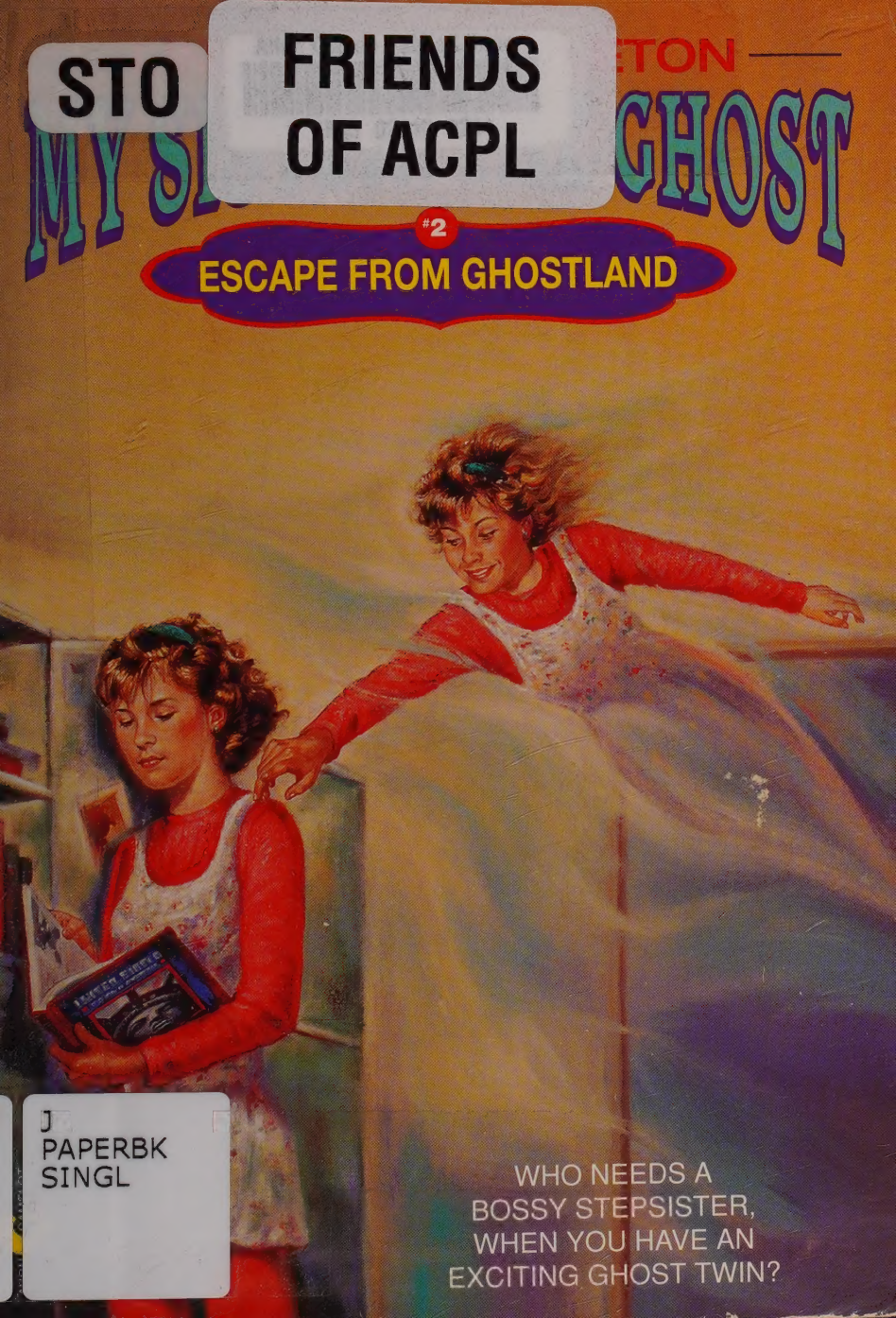

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MY SISTER, THE GHOST

#2

ESCAPE FROM GHOSTLAND

LINDA JOY SINGLETON

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OPM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In appreciation of my grandmothers,
Alferetta Emburg and Florence Lowes

Also to my favorite author,
who inspired my teen years
and encouraged my career,
Margaret Sutton Hunting

One

ONE

"You can't wear overalls to a wedding!" I told my soon-to-be stepsister, Heather.

But would she listen to me?

Not a chance!

Instead she balled her fists, narrowed her steel-blue eyes, and declared, "I'll wear whatever I want! I like overalls and I *hate* wimpy pink dresses. Forget it, Miranda!"

Today was the day my mother married Heather's father. I was the maid of honor and Heather was a bridesmaid. Our dresses had been ordered and fitted months ago—and suddenly she hated hers. A disaster!

I knew Heather would never listen to me. But just then Mom came into the dressing room. When she hugged Heather and said, "Sweetie, you'll look lovely in pink," Heather's complaints melted away.

I didn't like *my* mother calling Heather "sweetie" or hugging her. But it seemed to do the trick.

And an hour later, Heather and I stood side-by-side in the church, wearing identical frilly pink dresses.

The wedding march started, and I gripped my flower bouquet nervously. I hoped I didn't do anything embarrassing like drop my bouquet or trip and fall on my face.

Please, don't let me mess up!

My heart pounded and I squeezed the bouquet so hard a pink rose petal floated to the brown carpet.

This was really it!

Wedding time!

I began my long, exciting, scary walk down the aisle.

Luckily, I didn't drop the flowers, trip over my high heels, or fall on my face.

And forty minutes later, Mom and Donovan shared "I do's." Officially, I was now part of the Drew family. Nice, easygoing Donovan was my stepfather. Rowdy Davey, Eddie, and Adam were my stepbrothers. And Heather, the bully who used to take my lunch money every day, was now my stepsister.

Stepsister.

Yuck. I hated that word. It made me think of wicked girls in fairy tales.

I didn't need or want a stepsister.

I already had a sister.

An identical twin named Melody . . . who just happened to be a ghost.

While everyone else was having wedding cake inside the reception hall, I sat outside on a bench and sighed. I looked around—searching, hoping, wishing Melody would pop in. I hadn't seen her in six long months. And then she'd only been able to stay for a week. That's all the time her earth pass from Ghostland allowed.

Gosh, I really missed Melody!

She looked exactly like me, with the same curly au-

burn hair and green eyes, but we were very different. She loved playing silly pranks and causing mischief. I was afraid of getting in trouble and tried hard to be good.

Of course, the biggest difference between us was I lived on earth with our mom, and since the drowning accident, she lived in Ghostland with our grandmother, Grammy Tammy.

A major bummer. Especially since Melody couldn't visit me without an earth pass. Maybe she hadn't been able to get one. Is that why she wasn't at Mom's wedding?

There wouldn't even be a wedding if Melody hadn't interfered with some magical matchmaking! Last October, Mom was engaged to the wrong man. Bryant Sherwood was a nice, nerdy, wealthy guy with a great big house. I *really* loved Bryant's fancy house. But I only liked Bryant. And I think Mom felt the same way.

So Melody zapped in from Ghostland and played cupid. She used hocus-pocus to match Mom with Donovan Drew, and Bryant became history. So far things had turned out wonderfully. Donovan wasn't rich, but he earned enough so Mom could quit her job at Rosa's Beauty Basement and start her own salon.

"Miranda!" a girl's voice called out.

I stopped daydreaming and jumped off the bench. For a moment there, I'd thought Melody had finally showed up. But when I turned, I saw dark-haired Diane Kampfer. She was in my sixth-grade class, and a serious student like me. I'd invited her to Mom's wedding because I liked her a lot . . . but she wasn't my ghost twin.

I hid my disappointment with a wide smile. "Hi, Diane."

"Why aren't you inside enjoying the reception? Your mother's getting ready to toss her bridal bouquet. And whoever catches it is the next one to get married. Come on!" Diane urged, taking my arm.

"I don't even like boys," I objected, shaking her off. "Getting married is out of the question."

Diane laughed. "It's just a tradition. Besides, we're too young to even date."

"I guess it could be fun to try for the bouquet."

"That's the spirit. Let's go."

I nodded, but I paused and looked around once more . . . hoping to see a real spirit.

Where are you, Melody? I thought sadly.

Am I ever going to see you again?

Rough-and-tumble tomboy Heather caught the bouquet.

Can you believe it? With a dozen squealing females jumping for the bridal bouquet, the only girl who stood in the back and didn't even try for the flowers ended up with the bouquet flying directly into her arms.

I laughed so hard that tears streamed down my face. That made Heather furious. She told me to shut up . . . "or else." I could tell she meant it, so I didn't say another word until we were on our way home.

Home.

Not my duplex, but the Drews' decades-old three-bedroom tract house. As we pulled up in Donovan's van, I saw a huge yellow truck in the driveway.

The movers had arrived with Mom's and my stuff.

A big lump formed in my throat, and I felt scared. Up until now, everyone's focus was the wedding. But the wedding was over, and two adults plus five kids

would begin their lives together. And the worst part was that instead of having a bedroom to myself, I had to share Heather's room—and I already knew she didn't like pink. My quilted bedspread was pink, my curtains were pink, and some of my stuffed animals were pink.

How could Heather and I possibly share a room?

While Heather and her brothers raced into the house, I stood uncertainly in the driveway. Mom had to call my name three times before I finally trudged inside. Timidly, I entered Heather's room and peered inside.

"Oh, no!" I cried. "This is never going to work!"

One room multiplied by two sets of furniture equals disaster. My trundle bed, desk, and dresser were squashed together against one wall. The other three walls had Heather's stuff: sports trophies, car models, posters, grubby piles of clothes, a desk, a dresser, and a huge waterbed.

"Whatsa matter?" Heather asked, coming up next to me. She shut the door behind us and plucked a crumpled pair of striped overalls from a pile.

"I can't live like this!" I told her.

"Huh?" She was already unzipping her frothy pink gown and tugging on her overalls.

I made a sweeping gesture. "Just look! Your stuff is everywhere and my stuff is crowded in a corner."

She shrugged. "So? What's the problem?"

"It isn't fair!"

"I was here first," she said in her old bully tone. "You should be glad I'm willing to share." Heather plopped on her waterbed, which made a swishing sound. "And you'd better not put anything pink in *my* room!"

I was so mad I couldn't speak. If Donovan Drew hadn't knocked and entered right then, I might have said

something terrible to Heather. Instead, I whirled on my new stepdad and insisted, "I want to go back home!"

Donovan frowned and ran his fingers through his dark-blond head. "Miranda, this is your home now."

"But there's no place for me! Heather is hogging the room! And it's so messy! I can't live here!"

Mom appeared behind her groom. She'd changed out of her bridal gown and into neat slacks and a floral print blouse. "Is there a problem?"

"You bet there is!" Heather answered, pointing at me. "She's the problem."

"Me?" I squawked.

"Yes! Who needs a sister anyway? Three brothers is more than enough."

Mom and Donovan exchanged tense glances. I expected Mom to hug me and make everything better, but instead she walked over to Heather and hugged *her!*

"Heather, calm down," Mom said gently. "I'm sure you and Miranda can work this out."

"I offered to share my room. I tried to be nice."

"You're as nice as can be, honey," Mom said, stroking Heather's wispy blond hair as she used to do with me.

Which hurt.

I wanted to hurt Mom back, so I snapped, "Heather is not nice! She's a gross slob! And I don't want to live with her!"

Donovan rubbed his chin. "Simmer down, Miranda. We can work something out."

Mom gave me a stern look. "I think you owe Heather an apology. You insulted her."

"But I didn't do anything!"

Mom's gray eyes clouded over. "This is supposed to

be a day for celebrating our new family, not arguing. I'm disappointed in you, Miranda.''

I glanced down at my clasped hands, feeling guilty. Mom had been uptight and stressed lately. Quitting her job, starting a new business, and marrying a man with four kids was a lot to deal with at once. I knew she didn't need problems from me, too.

Donovan gently rubbed Mom's shoulders. ''Relax, hon. In a few hours we'll be on our way to Lake Tahoe. Two nights alone, away from all worries.''

Mom gave a weary sigh. ''I can't wait. Thank goodness the kids have spring vacation and Aunt Mary won't have to deal with their school schedules. Your aunt is a saint. I only hope the kids don't give her any trouble,'' she added, her gaze traveling to me and Heather.

My stepsister flashed Mom a sweet smile. ''No trouble at all! You can count on me, Katherine. If Miranda wants more space in here, we can move my stuff around.''

''Thank you, Heather. You're very generous. I'm proud of you.''

Proud of her and disappointed in me? I thought to myself. ''But Mom—'' I sputtered. ''You don't understand.''

''I'm afraid I do,'' she said sadly. ''You're used to being the only child, and I may have spoiled you. But now you're part of a family, and you'll learn to share.''

Mom hardly ever got mad at me. And if she did, I knew I deserved it. But I didn't deserve it now. She was being totally unfair.

They all were!

I'd never felt so alone in my life.

For the next thirty minutes, Donovan, Mom, and

Heather rearranged the room. They ignored me, so I went through my boxes and tried to organize my things. I placed my stuffed animals around my pink-quilted bed and folded clothes neatly in my dresser. Then I reached for the most important box, the one I'd carefully packed my beautiful glass figurines in and labeled FRAGILE. But when I held the box, I heard a horrible rattle, like broken glass.

This was too much!

The tears I'd been holding back streamed down my cheeks, and I pushed the box away. I couldn't bear to look inside, so instead, I jumped from my bed and ran out of the room.

I didn't even know where I was running, but I ended up in the backyard by the pool.

I sank down on a bench, and buried my face in my hands.

How had everything gone so wrong?

The day had started off okay. I'd felt special as the maid of honor, and I'd had fun with Diane at the reception.

But now I couldn't stop crying.

And I wished I could run away. That would show everyone! I'd leave Heather her dumb room and I'd disappear. Mom would be sorry then. She'd realize she loved me best, and she wouldn't hug Heather anymore.

Yeah, running away would be a good idea. If only I had the nerve to do it.

There was a sudden swishing sound and I blinked back my tears and whirled around. But no one was there.

"Up here!" someone said.

I whirled again, and looked at the pool.

I gasped, unable to believe my eyes!

Floating above the calm blue water was a ghostly girl with bright red curls.

My twin sister was back!

"Melody!" I exclaimed joyfully. "I've missed you so much! I can't believe you're really here!"

"Believe it." Her green eyes sparkled as she floated over to me. Her feet never touched the ground. But then she *was* a ghost.

I stared at my twin, amazed all over again at how much she looked like me. Thin figure, chin-length auburn hair, and wide mouth. Of course, we were dressed differently. I still wore my maid-of-honor gown, which seemed dull next to her lime-green miniskirt, wide black leather belt, and silver blouse with a metallic jade-green vest.

Melody wrapped her cool arms around me. "I'm so happy to see you, Miranda!"

"Me, too. I was afraid you would never come back."

She nodded. "I promised I would, and this time I'm here to stay."

"For how long?" I asked eagerly.

She twirled in the air and announced, "Forever! Miranda, I've run away from Ghostland!"

Two

"You've run away?" I asked in astonishment. "Why?"

"Because I hate rules! And I'm sick of boring lessons, tons of homework, and hours of studying." She sank down to the grassy lawn and sighed. "So I left."

I sat next to her and wrinkled my brow. "But I thought you needed an earth pass to visit me."

"Another stupid rule! But I fooled the Ghostland guards with a fake pass. I forged Grammy Tammy's signature and snuck out."

"You didn't!" I gasped, shocked that Melody would do something so wild. I'd never have that much courage. "Won't you get in trouble?"

She nodded, looking pale even for a ghost. "Probably—if I get caught. But if you help me, I won't get caught."

"Help you do what?" I gulped, feeling sick to my stomach. Unlike Melody, I lived in fear of getting into trouble. If I helped my twin, would a bunch of powerful ghosts come after me?

"Hide me," she answered with a confident grin. "When Grammy comes looking for me, tell her I'm not here."

"But that's lying!" Now *I* was turning pale.

"Not exactly—because I really won't be here. I'll get a shivery warning that Grammy is coming, and zap away before she can catch me. Then you can truthfully say I'm not here."

I still wasn't convinced. I'd only seen my ghostly grandmother once, and she didn't look like someone who was easily fooled. She'd been a ghost decades longer than Melody. She probably knew a lot more spooky tricks.

"It won't work," I told Melody.

She plucked a piece of grass and twisted it around her fingers. "You do want me to stay, don't you?"'

"Of course I do! You're my twin sister, my other half, and we belong together. If you hadn't drowned in a pool when you were two, we'd have grown up together. Who knows? Mom and Dad might not have gotten a divorce, and I'd be sharing a room with you. Not gross and grimy Heather."

She tilted her head as if surprised. "I thought you liked Heather."

"Not anymore," I answered, feeling angry all over again. "She's ruining my life! I wish she would vanish and never return."

Melody flashed a devilish grin. "That could be arranged."

"No!" I shrieked, afraid of Melody's ghostly powers. "I don't want anything bad to happen to her. I just don't want to share a room with her."

"Simple enough. Get a room of your own."

''Where? In the attic or garage?'' I combed my fingers through my curly hair and pointed toward the house. ''There are only three bedrooms. Too crowded! I liked it better when I was an only child. Being part of a big family is no fun!''

''Sounds like fun to me. Maybe you just need to get used to it. I'd love to be part of a real family,'' Melody added wistfully. ''Dumb rules aren't the only reason I ran away.''

''What do you mean?''

''Lately, I've been thinking about all the earth fun I missed by living in Ghostland.''

''Like what?''

''Oh, there are so many things!'' She floated off the ground a few inches. ''Picnics, bike rides, sleepovers . . .''

''I haven't been on many picnics, but I ride my bike every day. And the sleepover Diane had last month was a blast. All of my friends were there: Betty Jo, Judith, Cheryl, Tiffany, and even the most popular girl at school, Camille Glitzenstein.''

''What about Heather?''

''No way! Heather hates sleepovers. She thinks giggling girls are sissy wimps, but I had a great time.''

Melody flipped over in mid-air and floated on her stomach. ''I would have a great time, too. But Ghostland has more rules than fun.''

''It can't be as bad as sharing a room with Heather.''

''Worse! And as long as I stay there, I'll never have what I want more than anything.''

''What?''

She paused and then answered softly, ''A birthday party.''

"You're joking! Haven't you ever celebrated your birthday?"

"Only the two parties we shared as toddlers. They're my very favorite memories."

"Wow! I can't remember that long ago. You have a great memory!"

"Right-o!" Melody nodded. "I can recall everything like it just happened—gifts, balloons, cake, games. I sure miss them!"

I sat cross-legged and looked up at my floating twin. "Ask Grammy Tammy to give you a party for your twelfth birthday. Our birthday is only a week away. Mom usually gives me a special skating or bowling party, but because of the wedding, I'm just having a small party at home this year."

"Even a small party would be great. But I already asked Grammy and you know what she did?"

"What?"

"*Laughed!* As if I were a little kid who just said something cute. She told me, 'Ghosts don't need material gifts.' Then she assigned me an extra hour of meditation studying. Grammy just doesn't understand."

"I know what that's like," I said sadly.

Melody's green eyes grew serious. "Then will you help me, Miranda? Will you hide me from Grammy?"

I shivered. "For how long?"

She wound some of her red hair around her finger, a gesture of mine when I was upset. "I don't know. Running away is forbidden. I'm not sure what will happen."

A cool chill of fear filled me. I could feel Melody's pain, and I felt sorry for her. But did I have the courage to hide her from Grammy Tammy?

Yes, I decided suddenly. For my twin, I could be

brave—no matter how scary the ghosts of Ghostland might be.

"Okay, Melody."

She clapped her hands with excitement. "Thanks! I knew you'd help—"

She stopped mid-sentence when there was a loud creaking noise.

We both jumped and looked at the house. Someone was opening the back door.

"Quick! Vanish!" I whispered to Melody.

She glanced around and cried, "Where should I go?"

"I don't know! But you can't let anyone see you!"

"Right-o!" Melody replied with a mischievous laugh.

The backyard door opened and Heather stepped outside. I thought for sure she would see my ghost twin, but a violent gust of wind swept her shoulder-length blond hair in her face.

Heather squealed and reached for her hair. But the wind picked up speed and swirled around Heather like a powerful twister.

"Help!" Heather cried, spinning so fast her face was a blur. "I can't stop! What's happening!"

"Melody!" I whispered. "Cut it out! Don't hurt her!"

Melody grinned. "She's okay. She'll stop spinning when I zap out of here. And I just thought of the perfect place to go."

"Where?"

"To visit our father. See you later!" Then before I could say another word, she disappeared.

And the whirlwind around Heather disappeared, too.

I watched from across the pool as Heather took a few

dizzy steps forward. Her wild blond hair stood up in places and she looked confused. So confused, that the next step she took sent her straight into the swimming pool!

"Heather!" I called as she made a clumsy splashdown.

I hurried forward and bent over by the edge of the cement pool. I felt queasy being near the water. I had never gotten over my fear of drowning, and I hoped Heather didn't need to be rescued. "Are you okay? Can you swim?"

"Of course I can swim!" she sputtered, thrashing her arms. "I'm not a wimp like you. What happened? I heard you talking to someone."

"No. We're the only ones here." Trying to be helpful, I tossed a nearby plastic duck-shaped inner tube to her.

Heather ignored the floating duck and swam to the edge of the pool. As she climbed out, she aimed her steel-blue eyes at me. "You did this!" she accused.

"How could I? I was on the other side of the pool. You . . . you just fell."

She shook her head, sending droplets of water through the air. "I never fall. You must have pushed me."

I backed away from her. "But I didn't. It wasn't me—"

"Then who was it? The invisible man?" Heather balled her fists and glared at me.

"Not exactly," I said smiling slightly. "But close."

"So you think this is funny?" she snapped, wringing out her soggy hair. "Maybe I should push *you* in the pool."

"No!" I panicked, instantly terrorized.

Heather gave me a nasty look, then shrugged. "I'm not going to be the one to cause problems for Katherine. But you'd better not play tricks on me again. Or else!"

Then she turned and, dripping wet, strode into the house.

I waited until I was sure Heather was gone, then I tried calling Melody. But she didn't appear, so I went back inside. Luckily, Heather wasn't in our room.

Flopping on my bed, I wondered if Melody had really zapped to Dad's home. Would she silently watch or play ghostly pranks? What would she think of her toddler half-brother Jeremy and Dad's new wife, Felicity? I hoped Melody wasn't having such a good time with them that she would forget about me.

Gosh, I really needed to talk with her.

I stood up and spoke to the empty air, "Melody! Come back. Can you hear me?"

No answer, and I began to feel silly. Like maybe I'd imagined that Melody had ever been here . . . though of course, Heather's pool splashdown and soggy clothes had been solid proof that my ghostly twin had been up to her usual tricks.

"Melody! Please come back!" I tried again.

The room's temperature suddenly dropped, and I shivered. I looked up, down, and sideways. I sensed a ghostly presence, but I didn't see my twin.

Slowly, a filmy glowing shape appeared over Heather's bed. It shimmered and swirled in the air. Hope filled my heart.

It was a ghost all right!

"Melody!" I cried joyfully.

''No,'' a low, gentle feminine voice answered. ''I'm not Melody.''

My mouth sagged in shock as the silvery shape became a solid, white-haired, slender woman. She wore snug black leather pants and a silver sequinned top. And although we'd never officially met, I knew exactly who she was.

My own grandmother.

Grammy Tammy.

Three

Grammy had come for Melody! And I had promised Melody to help her hide—even if it meant lying to my own grandmother.

But I didn't want to lie to her. I wanted to hug her and ask her a million questions. She'd died a few years before I was born, so I never knew her. Mom had told me that Grandmother Tamara had been sick and stuck in a wheelchair. But that was the old earth-bound grandma. As a ghost, Grammy Tammy really rocked with energy. The wheelchair was gone and now she zipped, zapped, and floated with ease. And I yearned to know her . . . to love her.

"Miranda, don't be afraid," Grammy said softly, her silver slippers floating down to the carpet.

I stared longingly at her, wanting to ask all those questions swarming in my head. But I simply said, "I'm not afraid."

"Splendid! I was worried you'd scream when you saw me. Melody said you were easily scared."

"I've gotten used to ghosts . . . almost." I paused and added, "Hello, Grandma."

Her eyes, which were a brighter gray than my mother's, showed surprise. "You know who I am?"

I nodded and leaned forward on the edge of my bed. "Yes. I saw you once with Melody when she visited last October."

"Then you should know that Melody calls me Grammy Tammy. And that's what you should call me, too." She clapped her hands together. "And here I'd worried you'd faint dead away."

I couldn't resist a grin. "I'm still alive."

"You're as smart and plucky as your sister." Grammy sat next to me on the bed and took my hand. Her touch was cool, yet it warmed my heart. I was flattered she thought I was smart and plucky . . . whatever "plucky" meant.

"Miranda, my own grand baby," she went on. "At last we meet. But under such sorry circumstances. Oh, that twin of yours! She's always been a wild child, but never this bad. She's got herself in a nasty pickle this time!"

I tried to act innocent. "What has Melody done?"

"She's run away!"

"How terrible!"

"It's worse than terrible, and I'm sick with worry," she said anxiously. "Miranda, I need to find Melody. Is she here?"

"No," I answered honestly.

"Do you know where she is?"

I crossed my fingers behind my back and shook my head. "I don't know." Which was sort of the truth. I

didn't know *exactly* where Melody had zapped to. She could be at Dad's office or his home.

"You don't?" Grammy sounded surprised. "But I was so sure she'd come here. She's been begging to visit you for months. If she didn't come here, where did she go?"

"I can't answer that," I said carefully.

Grammy turned and looked deeply into my face. It was as if she could read my thoughts. "It's important that I find Melody."

I gulped back fear. "How . . . how important?"

"Very," she answered gravely. "Melody is young and impulsive. Running away may seem like a prank to her, but it's a serious crime in Ghostland."

"Crime?" I echoed, clutching my pink bedspread. Images of prison bars and dark dungeons flashed through my mind. "What do you mean?"

Grammy waved her hand. "It's hard to explain. Ghostland is a wonderful place for learning and growth. But Melody is a rebellious cloud hopper who refuses to follow rules. Her earth memories are too strong, and she yearns for the impossible."

"She just wants to be with me. That isn't a crime," I said defensively. "I wish for impossible things, too. I've even wanted to run away."

"But you had the sense not to do it!" Grammy gave a soft sob. "And I'm afraid for Melody. If she doesn't come back, I may lose her . . . forever."

My eyes widened and my heart pounded. "Why?"

"Ghostland Rule #209. To visit another world, a ghost must have a pass. If a ghost does not have a pass or a pass expires, the ghost will be banished from Ghostland."

''Banished? You mean Melody will have to stay on earth?'' My mind raced with the exciting possibilities. Melody would go to my school and we'd do everything together. Maybe she could use her magic to zap us our own bedroom. I'd rather share a room with a ghost than a bully any day.

I smiled at Grammy Tammy. ''I want Melody to stay on earth. It'd be great! She could live with me.''

''No,'' Grammy said, shaking her snowy head. ''She wouldn't be allowed to. She'd be sent to an empty dwelling to live in the shadows for eternity. No more learning, no more growth, no more life.''

I shuddered. Spending forever in the shadows sounded horrible. I hated dark, scary, gloomy places.

Grammy floated off the bed and looked down at me from the ceiling. ''Since Melody isn't here, I have to go.''

''No!'' I cried, jumping off my bed. ''Please, don't! I don't want Melody to get into trouble.''

Grammy's silvery blouse shone under the ceiling lights. ''Neither do I.'' She swirled above me, reaching out with one hand and snapping her fingers. ''Which is why I brought this.''

I gasped, recognizing the golden piece of paper Grammy held. ''An earth pass!'' I exclaimed.

''Yes. A real one, not a fake like the one Melody forged.''

I blushed, feeling guilty for my twin. I had been right about Grammy Tammy not being easily fooled.

''This is a genuine earth pass for Melody. She may think I don't care about her, but I do. And I'm trying to protect her. So she may visit earth five more days.''

''Five days?''

"This pass expires next Friday at midnight. By then, I hope Melody will come to her senses and return home." Grammy Tammy swooped down and placed the golden paper in my hand. "If you see your sister, give this to her."

"She might not come here," I fibbed.

"Miranda, this isn't a game. Melody is in danger. Promise me you'll convince her to return to Ghostland—before it's too late."

"Too late?" I repeated in a shaky voice. "I'll tell Melody to return by Friday . . . if I see her."

"Not 'if.' *When* you see her." Grammy met my eyes and smiled knowingly.

I took a deep breath. "All right. I promise."

"Thank you, Miranda. I've been watching you grow up, and I know I can trust you to keep your word." She reached out and put her arms around me. "I love you, honey. Good-bye."

And then my grandmother disappeared.

I don't know how long I sat on my bed, staring at the earth pass. I was dazed, confused, and worried. I had finally met Grammy Tammy. That was wonderful. But Melody was in trouble. And that was terrible.

I heard footsteps and the doorknob jiggled.

Someone was coming!

I reached across my bed and quickly slipped the pass under my pillow.

A second later, Heather strode into the room. Her expression was cool, as if she still blamed me for dunking her in the pool.

"Katherine wants you in the living room," Heather stated.

"Why?"

"She and Pop are getting ready to leave for Lake Tahoe. They want you to meet Aunt Mary."

I glanced uneasily at my pillow. A corner of the golden pass was sticking out! I had to get rid of Heather before she saw it. "Okay. Tell Mom I'll be there in a minute."

"She wants you *now,*" Heather insisted.

"I, uh, I have to do something first."

Heather grabbed my arm and pulled me forward. "The only thing you have to do is meet Aunt Mary. Come on. Or else!"

Helplessly, I peeked over my shoulder. The glowing paper seemed to blink a shimmery S.O.S. But it would have to wait. I couldn't risk making Heather suspicious, so I left the room.

Mom smiled when she saw me and gestured to a stocky, salt-and-pepper-haired woman wearing dingy jeans and a BITE 'EM SHARKS T-shirt. "Miranda, this is Don's aunt, Mary Drew."

"Call me Aunt Mary," the older woman said in a booming voice. She held out her hand to me. "Put her there, Mandy. Let's see your grip."

"Huh?" No one ever called me Mandy. I timidly offered my hand, and Aunt Mary gave it a hard shake. Too hard!

"Ouch!" I cried, pulling back.

Aunt Mary ran her fingers through her short, boyish hair. "Not much of a grip, Mandy. But we'll toughen you up. What position do you play? Outfield? Catcher? Can you pitch?"

Mom smoothed her honey-blond hair and gave an

apologetic smile. ''Miranda has never been very athletic.''

''A lightweight, huh? Two days isn't much, but I'll do my best to toughen her up.'' Aunt Mary bobbed her head with enthusiasm. ''Never met a Drew who couldn't kick it up with the best.''

''I'm not a Drew,'' I reminded her. ''I'm a Mitchell.''

''My daughter doesn't enjoy sports,'' Mom said, patting me on the arm.

''Why not?'' Aunt Mary countered, scrunching up her wrinkled face in surprise. ''Kids and sports go together. You want your girl to be a yellow-spined ninny?''

I groaned. Aunt Mary reminded me of a grown-up Heather. Yuck! Just what I needed. Two Heathers!

Donovan, who had been sitting quietly in a recliner, stood up and put his arm lovingly around my mother. ''Playing outdoors is healthy for kids, Katherine. A bit of dirt and sweat won't hurt Miranda. It'll be good for her.''

Mom gazed up at Donovan. ''I suppose so.''

I stared at Mom—or the alien being who now possessed my mother's body. ''Doesn't what I think matter?''

Heather smirked and murmured, ''Not today.''

I bit my lip nervously. The idea of team sports with Heather and her three rowdy brothers scared me. Even little Adam weighed more than I did!

''No way am I playing ball games!'' I exclaimed, crossing my arms over my chest. ''The Drew kids will tromp me into the ground—and enjoy it!''

Mom turned toward me with surprise, dismay, and

annoyance. She stepped forward and wagged a finger at me. "Miranda!"

I lowered my gaze. "If you make me do sports, I might really get sick. Then you'd have to cancel your honeymoon trip and stay with me."

Her gray eyes flashed dangerously. "Miranda, that's enough. Come with me. Now."

I gulped and nodded. With my head hung, I followed Mom down the hall, to Heather's and my bedroom. When she shut the door behind us, I knew I was really in trouble.

"I'm through babying you, Miranda. I realize leaving home and moving here is difficult for you, but that's no excuse for your rude behavior."

I sat on the edge of my trundle bed, quickly tucked the earth pass far under the pillow, and nodded meekly. "I'm sorry. It's just that Heather—"

"Please, no more complaints about Heather!" Mom ordered. "You're going to get along with your stepsister even if it kills you."

"It might. You don't know her like I do."

"I know a lot about Heather. She's big for her age and awkward with other girls. She's a sweet girl who's grown up surrounded by boys. She needs understanding."

"She's not the only one," I whispered.

Mom continued as if she didn't hear me. "And most of all, Heather needs a mother."

My heart sunk and my mind cried out, *But you're* my *mother!* And I resented Heather more than ever.

"I know I can't replace Heather's or the boys' real mother, but I'm going to try hard to earn their love. And I expect you to try, too."

I tightened my lips and didn't reply.

"Honey, we're part of the Drew family now." Mom came over and gently put her arms around me. "It's not easy blending two families into one, but it's important we make this work. And I really need your help."

"How?" I asked suspiciously.

She looked deeply into my face. "By treating Heather like a sister."

I wanted to tell Mom that I already had one sister and didn't need another—especially a sloppy room-hog who enjoyed bossing me around. But if I said this, Mom would probably ground me for life. So I just shrugged.

Mom took my gesture as a yes and hugged me. Then she rose and left.

I looked at the crowded room that was now half mine, and I wanted to cry. My belongings may be here, but this wasn't my *home*. My box of figurines still sat unopened on the floor. I knew some of my pretty glass pieces were broken, which made me feel worse. Like the fragile glass, the special relationship I'd always had with my mom seemed shattered, too.

And I was so confused.

Everyone wanted something from me!

Melody wanted me to help her hide out.

Grammy Tammy wanted help getting Melody back to Ghostland.

And now Mom wanted help with Heather.

But who was going to help *me?*

Four

ƚΩNՆ

That evening, Melody zapped back in while I was brushing my teeth.

"Boo!" She tapped me on the shoulder.

I whirled away from the bathroom mirror, almost choking on mint-flavored toothpaste. "Mmmmph!" I mumbled.

"I had a terrific visit with Dad!" Melody announced.

I spit into the sink, then rinsed my mouth. Since my dad moved eighty miles away, I rarely saw him or his new family. Of course, distance was no problem for Melody.

I asked in horror, "You didn't let him see you?"

"Not a glimpse! Only little Jeremy saw me. And he can't talk much yet! He's starting to walk, though, and the way he wobbles back and forth is so cute!"

I shrugged. "Jeremy's okay. For a half-brother."

Melody pointed to my tube of toothpaste and sent it flying through the air to her hands. She tasted the green and white stuff and made a face. "Yuck! How can you eat this gross goop?"

"It's not for eating!" I said, giggling. "I clean my teeth with it. But I guess ghosts don't have to worry about plaque and cavities."

She flashed a pearly grin. "We don't need baths either."

"Ghostland sounds like a neat place. Maybe you shouldn't have run away," I said, remembering the earth pass now hidden in the bottom of my figurine box. Fortunately, only a glass cat had been broken. But I didn't have any shelves to display the rest of my collection on, so everything remained in the box—which made it a good hiding place for the earth pass.

"I already told you why I ran away," Melody said defensively. "I used to think Ghostland was terrific. Flying, vanishing, and magic lessons were a blast. And if I broke a few rules, everyone seemed amused. But not anymore."

"Why not? What happened?"

"I got older. And now Grammy Tammy says I have to grow up."

"Speaking of Grammy Tammy—" I began.

She interrupted, "I love her, but she drives me crazy! Follow the rules, do your homework, and study for hours! That's what she expects me to do every day! I wish I lived here with you. Your life is so much more exciting."

"Exciting? No way! You're the lucky one. You can float, vanish, and do magic. And you don't have to share a room with Heather. I would love to be *you*."

"And I would love to be *you*," Melody replied. "Too bad we can't trade places like twins do in TV movies."

"You see TV in Ghostland?" I asked, surprised.

She nodded. "Yeah. Space satellites make it easy.

Hundreds of channels to choose from. Not that I'm allowed to watch very often. Last week one of my teachers, Mr. Ghandi, made me study ten hours a day in the celestial library for a report on the meaning of life. Major bor-ring! So I livened things up by reporting on lifeguards."

"The meaning of lifeguards?" I giggled.

"Yeah. Is there wisdom in wipeouts? The spiritual side of surfing. Pretty creative, huh? Of course, my teacher didn't think so. For a peaceful guy, he can sure yell. And he flunked me. Now I have to take his class again—if I ever go back."

I frowned, remembering Grammy Tammy's warning that Melody could be banished to the shadows. "But you have to go back!"

"Not until I have fun on earth. I've decided that I won't return until I enjoy at least three fun things: a picnic, a sleepover, and a birthday party."

"But my birthday party is on Saturday! And you can't stay that long!" I cried nervously. "Or you'll get into trouble."

"Not me," she answered with a cocky grin. "Grammy never stays angry very long."

"But what about . . ." I paused and shivered. "What if other ghosts punish you?"

She floated and perched herself on the sink's edge. "There are rumors about ghosts being exiled into the shadows, but I don't believe it. I'm too smart to fall for that fairy tale. I don't believe shadow ghosts exist."

I gulped. "You don't?"

"I've never met one, so how can I be sure they're real? I think it's just a scary rumor used to make fun-loving ghosts like me follow rules."

''But what if they're real?''

''No problem,'' she answered, holding out her hand and flashing a golden paper. ''Remember I have an earth pass.''

''A fake,'' I reminded her.

''But an excellent fake,'' Melody said proudly. ''And since I forged it myself, there's no expiration date. I'm free as a breeze for as long as I want!''

I touched her cool arm. ''I don't want anything bad to happen to you.''

''Nothing will.''

She sounded so positive that some of my fears faded away. But I still needed to warn her that Grammy was looking for her. ''Melody, there's something I have to tell—''

I was interrupted by loud knocking. ''Hey! Who's in there?''

''Yikes!'' I cried softly. ''That's Davey. My oldest stepbrother.''

Davey pounded out a noisy tune on the door. ''Open up! There's only one bathroom in this house!''

''I'm almost done,'' I called out.

Melody immediately vanished, but I could hear her say, ''Think I'll go tag along with Dad and Felicity while they go out to dinner.''

''Don't leave yet. You need to know about—''

''We'll talk later,'' my invisible sister cut in. ''I want to liven Dad's life up with some magic. It'll be fun to see the look on his face when his menu flies off to another table.''

''You wouldn't!''

''Wouldn't what? Who you talking to?'' Davey yelled, rapping on the door.

"No one," I answered, and when there wasn't a ghostly reply, I realized how true my words were.

Melody was gone, but I knew she'd be back.

And when she did, I'd tell her about Grammy's visit and give her the real earth pass. Then I'd figure out some way to take Melody on a picnic, plan a sleepover, and persuade Mom to celebrate my birthday a day early.

I'd convince Melody to return to Ghostland by Friday—even though more than anything I wanted her to stay.

"Basketball?" I cried the following morning when I heard the bad news.

Heather sipped milk and grinned at me from across the table. "Yup. Aunt Mary even brought a new basketball to replace the one Eddie shot with his BB gun."

Eddie jumped up and pantomimed like he had a gun in his hands. He aimed the imaginary weapon at me and shouted, "Pow! I shot that old ball and it exploded! Wow! What a hit!"

Suddenly the toast I was eating tasted like cardboard, and worry churned like sour milk in my stomach. I didn't like having stepbrothers any more than I liked sharing a room with a stepsister. They were so rough and messy.

A bunch of stepmonsters!

And I knew they'd enjoy stepping all over me.

Basketball! I'd never played any team sports, except once in fourth grade when a substitute teacher didn't know I caught colds easily and was excused from all outdoor games. We'd played soccer and I was so nervous that when I tried to kick the ball, I slipped in the wet grass and flipped backward.

Major embarrassing!

And basketball was sure to be embarrassing, too!

An hour later, I filed out of Aunt Mary's rust-colored station wagon behind Heather and her brothers. Aunt Mary dribbled a bright orange ball like a pro, spinning it underneath her leg and then sinking it in the basket.

"Davey and I are team captains," she announced. "Let's pick teams!"

I tried to hide behind Heather, but Davey chose her first. Then Aunt Mary chose Eddie. And it was down to five-year-old Adam and me.

Davey didn't hesitate to make his choice. "Adam!"

Aunt Mary rubbed her wrinkled brow and said without any enthusiasm, "Guess we'll take Miranda." Then she blew the whistle she wore on a string around her neck and tossed the basketball to Davey. "Let's play ball!"

"But I don't know how," I objected.

Heather rolled her eyes. "Everyone knows how to play basketball."

"Not me."

Aunt Mary grinned. "The best way to learn is to jump in and play. Just try to get the ball and shoot a basket. Then your team scores two points. Easy!"

The hoop seemed so far away and high. How could I ever make a basket? Still, Aunt Mary (or Nightmare Mary as I was beginning to think of her) was so enthusiastic, I didn't have the heart to disappoint her. So I gave a hesitant nod, and the game began.

For the next half hour, the Drews played basketball and I played dodge ball. Instead of trying to get the ball, I ducked and avoided it. Elbows jabbed me and

feet kicked me, and I was sure I was going to be one mess of bruises by the end of the day—*if I survived.*

"Miranda! Hands high for the ball!" Aunt Mary yelled. "You're doing great! Don't wimp out now!"

I looked up and saw an orange missile speeding towards me. *Wimp!* It wasn't my fault I was skinny and fragile. I didn't have a bunch of brothers to toughen me up like Heather. Instead, I was an only child with a mother who panicked whenever I sniffled. Still, I didn't want to be called a wimp.

I'd show them!

So instead of running, I stood and reached high. Too high! The ball slipped through my fingers and thumped me hard on the head. While I rubbed my aching head, the darned ball bounced away, over a fence and into a ditch.

Aunt Mary came over and flashed me a smile. "Good try! Not many beginners would try a head shot."

"I'm sorry I missed," I murmured.

"Easy come, easy go!" she said with unsinkable good spirits. "But we can't play without the ball, so hop over the fence and get it."

"Me? Climb that fence?" I asked in disbelief.

"Rules of good sportsmanship call for the person who sent the ball out to fetch it. And that's you, Mandy." She grinned and gave me a playful punch to my arm. "Go for it!"

There was no graceful way out of it without admitting I was afraid of climbing. "All right," I said miserably. "I'll go for it."

Then I turned and went to retrieve the ball. It wasn't easy heaving myself over the three rails, but I managed. I'd already had enough embarrassment for one day. I

wasn't going to add to the Drews' fun by falling off a fence.

"I hate sports," I grumbled as I carefully scooted down a steep drainage ditch. It was green, slimy with algae, and smelly. "I really, really, really hate sports."

"Why?"

I almost tumbled down to the muddy ditch when my ghost twin suddenly floated above me. "Melody! You startled me!"

She laughed, then pointed down at the basketball and caused it to fly up in the air. "Hey, I'm just trying to help. And by the looks of it, you need it."

"Do I ever! Can you play basketball?"

"Sure!" she said from her antigravity perch. "Grammy Tammy and I enjoy a little one-on-one when she's not forcing me to study."

"Then take my place," I said, watching Melody catch the ball and spin it on her fingertips. "You've pretended to be me before, so I know you can do it."

"But this is the first time I've had your permission." She grinned.

"I'm desperate." I groaned and held out my black and blue arms. "If I have to go back and play, I'll be one big bruise."

"First a little clothes-changing magic," Melody said, closing her eyes and concentrating. Slowly her peach leggings changed to dark blue jeans and her tangerine striped blouse became a lavender T-shirt with a kitten picture on front. She even zapped her hair into a pony-tail like mine.

I felt like I was looking at myself.

"I'm ready to shoot some hoops!" my twin ex-

claimed. And then she glided out of the ditch and headed for the basketball court.

I stayed behind the fence and grinned to myself.

The Drews wouldn't know what hit them!

It was quite a show. And I was proud of Melody for playing fair—without magic. She was a natural athlete; quicker and more accurate than Heather. Which made me wonder, if I weren't so afraid of sweat and bruises, whether I could become a good athlete, too. I'd have to think about that.

But for now, I just enjoyed the stunned, totally amazed looks on everyone's faces when Melody-pretending-to-be-me shot basket after basket. Aunt Mary's grin grew wide as her team gained point after point, until finally it was 20 to 20.

A tie!

A time out was called when Davey kicked Melody. While Aunt Mary lectured Davey on good sportsmanship, Melody zapped over to me and asked if I wanted to get back into the game.

"No. You're doing so well. I'd ruin it."

"It's just a game. You should have fun, too." She gave me a deep look. "It doesn't matter who wins. Besides, you have magic on your side."

"You didn't use magic while you played, and neither will I," I said, trying hard not to be afraid. "I'm going in, Melody."

"Great!" she exclaimed, zapping back into her own clothes.

"Wait here for me and no hocus-pocus!"

She grinned and gestured that she was crossing her heart. "You got it. No hocus-pocus."

I took a deep breath for courage and ran onto the

court just as Aunt Mary announced that since Davey got fouled, I got a free throw. If I scored, it would be the winning point.

Heather taunted, "You'll never make it, wimp!"

Davey added, "Your luck just ran out!"

And Aunt Mary wiped sweat from her brow and whispered, "If you sink this shot, Mandy, I owe you big time."

I'd never been under so much pressure!

I clutched the ball, bent down, and thought about how Heather called me a wimp. She had no right to call me that! Anger built within me, and I threw the ball. It zoomed up and then straight down through the net. I couldn't believe my own eyes. I'd actually done it. *My team won!*

I grinned and waved my arms in triumph.

"Thanks, Mandy," Aunt Mary said, slapping me on the back and nearly knocking me over.

"My name is Miranda."

"You got it . . . Miranda."

"And that's not all I get," I reminded her. "You said you owed me if I won the game for your team."

"That's right. A deal's a deal," Aunt Mary said heartily. "So what do you want? A sports cap? A cool T-shirt to replace that sissy cat one you're wearing? Or we can rent some videos and watch real sports in action."

"I don't want any of those things. What I want is . . ." I looked toward Melody's hiding place and suddenly knew exactly what I wanted. "I want a picnic."

Five

Aunt Mary and my stepsiblings loved the idea of a picnic. We piled back into the station wagon. Then we stopped off for fast food: fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, salad, rolls, soft drinks, and two scrumptious strawberry cream pies. Then six humans and one hitchhiking ghost headed for Sutton Park.

We found a grassy spot underneath a willow tree and Aunt Mary spread out an old blanket she'd found in her car. I sensed Melody was nearby waiting for a chance to take my place, but I couldn't see her.

The spicy smell of chicken made my stomach rumble.

I couldn't wait to eat!

But unfortunately, neither could the boys. "I get the legs!" Eddie called, diving for the chicken bucket.

Heather grabbed the bucket and hugged it to her chest. "Back off, dog-breath. If you're lucky I'll save you a wing."

"I want a leg!" Eddie insisted. "I get to choose first."

Heather grinned. ''No you don't. Girls first.''

Eddie nudged Davey and chuckled. ''Funny, I don't see any girls around here. Except maybe Miranda.''

Heather's mouth twisted in rage and I was glad I wasn't standing next to her. If she squeezed the bucket any tighter, instead of fried chicken for lunch, we'd have chicken soup.

I expected Heather to scream an ''or else'' threat, but instead she grew strangely quiet. She didn't say a word. She just put the bucket down and walked away.

The boys stared after her in amazement. Even Aunt Mary looked surprised and asked, ''What's wrong with her?''

''I don't know,'' I said, twisting one of my curls thoughtfully. Heather acted like a tomboy but then got upset when her brothers said she wasn't a girl. Confusing.

Still, I had promised Mom I'd try to get along with Heather. So I reached for a roll and stood up. ''I'm going after her.''

Nibbling on the roll, I hurried away to find Heather—although I had no idea what I would say when I reached her.

But I didn't get the chance.

As I passed under a huge, sprawling oak tree, an invisible hand grabbed my arm. ''Wait, Miranda!''

I stopped and looked through green leaves and gnarled branches. ''Melody? Where are you?''

''Right behind you.''

I whirled around and there she stood. ''I was wondering when you were going to pop in. Come on, you can help me find Heather.''

''Why do you want to find her?''

"Because she's upset." I paused and finished eating my roll. "Her brothers hurt her feelings, and I think she needs some understanding."

Melody raised her brows. "Since when do you care about her feelings? Isn't she the wicked stepsister?"

"She's not wicked . . . just bossy," I answered, surprised that I was defending Heather.

"Go find her if you want. I'll just pop over to the picnic and take your place. A real earth experience! Even though I won't be able to taste anything."

"Why not?"

"Ghosts can eat, but we don't have taste buds. Which is why I've never been on a picnic—until today. It'll be a thrilling adventure!"

I smiled at her enthusiasm. "Just save some food for me. Humans need food to survive—and strawberry pie is my favorite. After I find Heather, I'll hide in the girls' restroom until you're ready."

"Thanks! I just *love* being you! Even if it's only pretend," Melody said.

Then she went off to eat *my* lunch.

I looked all over the park, but no Heather. When I gave up and doubled back toward the Drews, I finally saw her. She sat on a blanket between Aunt Mary—and me. Of course, the red-haired girl with my face wasn't really me. And I was glad Melody was enjoying the picnic. But there couldn't be two Mirandas in one place, so I went to the girls' restroom.

The restroom was a dark, smelly, spooky hiding place. The heavy metal door and grim cement-block walls reminded me of a prison. Even with the lights on,

I was frightened. Nothing moved, except dust, spiders, and shadows.

Shadows.

Did shadow ghosts truly exist? If they did, was this how it felt to be one? Alone and afraid? Hungry for a human voice, and so bored that the huge black spider in the corner was beginning to look like a friend.

But Melody had assured me shadow ghosts were fiction. And I believed my sister. Or should I believe my grandmother?

I was so confused. And waiting in the semidark was scary. I wished I could leave and enjoy the picnic. Instead, I was stuck here with my new best friend, Seymore the Spider.

I counted the minutes until Melody finally rescued me.

Seventy-six minutes.

"It's about time!" I told my twin after she'd zapped in.

"Miss me?" she teased.

"I missed lunch more."

She reached into the empty air and snapped her fingers. "Will this do?" She held a small, overripe strawberry.

"One strawberry! Is that all that's left?"

"Your stepsiblings are mean, lean, eating machines," Melody answered with a chuckle.

I took the strawberry, but my stomach churned. Bathroom smells and fresh fruit didn't mix. I couldn't eat *here*. When I saw an ant crawling on the berry, I quickly dropped it into a metal trash can.

"I've lost my appetite," I said, facing my twin and shuddering.

"Well, you missed a great picnic. Earth is a neat place."

"But it isn't your home," I said gravely. "Melody, we need to have a serious talk."

"I hate anything serious," she complained, lifting into the air and floating over a sink.

"Come down here right now. I have something important to tell you."

Melody sat on the top corner of one of the three bathroom stalls and scrunched her face into a pout. "When you use words like serious and important, you sound just like Grammy Tammy."

"Maybe that's because we both care about you." I paused and added, "She's very worried about you."

Melody's green eyes grew wide. "How could you know that, unless . . . unless you spoke with her! Was Grammy here?"

"Not here surrounded by toilets and bad odors," I said with a grim smile. "But she was in my bedroom yesterday. She popped in looking for you."

"She actually let you see her?" Melody exclaimed.

"Yes. And she left something for you."

"What?"

"An earth pass. Melody, she knows about the fake one."

Melody jumped through the air, twirled, and then floated down beside me. "Grammy is so cool! A real earth pass! Fantastic! Now I can stay here as long as I want!"

"No you can't. The pass expires on Friday at midnight. And I promised Grammy you'd return home then. She's afraid you'll be banished to the shadows."

Melody waved my words away as if they were

annoying flies. "Grown-ups are always trying to trick kids with dumb fairy tales. Well, I'm not falling for it. There are no such things as shadow ghosts."

"Okay. Maybe it's a fairy tale. But Grammy was nice enough to give you an earth pass, so you should go . . . uh, oh! Someone's coming!" I cried out, hearing the sound of a door opening.

Melody instantly zapped invisible. "It's the wicked stepsister!"

There wasn't any time to duck into a bathroom stall, so I slowly turned to face Heather. She stood with one hand covering her mouth and the other pointing ahead. Her blue eyes bulged with shock.

"I saw two . . . two of you!" Heather stammered.

My heart raced and I tried to think of a believable explanation. "I'm the only one here," I said quickly.

"Where did she go? And how did *you* get here? You were at the picnic five minutes ago. I saw you there. I really did."

I couldn't think of a good defense, so I countered with an offense. "Heather, you don't look well. Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay! I saw another you. Then she was gone. And don't try to tell me I'm crazy. . . . Or else!"

I gestured to the mirrors over the sinks. "You saw my reflection in the mirror."

She rubbed her forehead. "No! I saw two faces, two bodies, two Mirandas."

I gave a small laugh that sounded more like a croak. "That's impossible. Maybe your brothers upset you so much, you're seeing things."

"I'm not seeing things . . ." Her words trailed off and she leaned weakly against the wall. "I'm really

confused. Yeah, the boys did upset me. I may not like girl stuff, but I am a girl. And it hurts when no one notices. They only notice you.''

''Me?'' I repeated.

''The boys respect you. They don't beat on you like they do me. Because you act like a girl.''

I wasn't sure if this was an insult or a compliment.

Heather sighed. ''Maybe I am going crazy. I need to talk to someone.''

I nodded sympathetically. ''You can talk to me, Heather.''

''Not you. I meant your mother. Katherine is so smart and understanding. I can't wait till she comes home tomorrow. She'll help me sort things out.''

''Mom?''

''Yeah,'' Heather said, her puzzled frown changing to a warm smile. ''Katherine is the greatest. I'm glad Pop married her.''

I pursed my lips to hide my quick anger. I changed the subject and suggested we join Aunt Mary and the boys.

When we left the restroom, Heather no longer seemed confused. In fact, she seemed happy. Probably because she was looking forward to seeing Mom tomorrow.

Which made me jealous.

I had tried to help Heather like Mom wanted. I'd been willing to listen to my stepsister's problems and I'd offered to be her friend.

Instead, she wanted the one thing that belonged to me: *my mother.*

That evening, while everyone else watched wrestling on the big-screen TV in the living room, I went into

my bedroom. I still wasn't happy about sharing the room with Heather, but since I had no choice, I decided to organize my drawers.

As I folded T-shirts, I stared enviously at Heather's two walls of shelves. I wished I could have some shelves, too. Instead, I only had the top of my bed, dresser, and desk to display my belongings. There wasn't any room for my glass figurine collection.

Melody magically appeared in the air over my bed.

Seeing ghosts had become an everyday thing. I smiled at my floating twin. "Hi, Sis."

"Hi, back. Need some help with your stuff?" Melody offered.

"Only if you can pop in some shelves?"

She grinned and sat upright as if on an invisible chair. "No can do. Ghosts can't create something out of nothing. But I could zap Heather's shelves to your side of the room."

"No, thanks," I said with a groan.

"Aren't you going to ask where I've been?"

"I'm afraid to."

"Don't be so uptight, Miranda. I've been playing with Jeremy again. I'm teaching him how to talk. Our little brother is very smart. He can say 'Mel Mel.' That's what he calls me."

I shut my shirt drawer and smiled. I hadn't seen Jeremy since Christmas. I always felt uncomfortable being around Dad's new family . . . like his old family didn't matter anymore. Still, I liked babies. It might be fun to see Jeremy—and Dad—again.

"Today has been a wonderful day," Melody told me, floating over my head.

I tipped my neck back and looked up. "I'm glad you

had fun. Having you around makes everything fun. Too bad you have to go home Friday.''

''I might not go back. I like your home better.''

I glanced at Heather's messy side of the room and grumbled, ''That makes one of us.''

''Earth is so exciting. I want to stay forever,'' Melody declared.

''I want you to stay, too. But I'm afraid you'll get in trouble. Shadow ghosts may be a fairy tale, but other ghosts in Ghostland might get mad at you. Be careful, Melody.''

She did a somersault in the air. ''Careful isn't my style. But don't worry! I'll be fine . . . Oh, no!''

''What?'' I cried, looking around nervously.

''Look at my arms. Ghost-bumps! I'm getting a tingly feeling.''

''I can feel a small tingle, too,'' I said in amazement. ''What does that mean?''

''Grammy Tammy's coming! I'm out of here!''

And before I could blink my eyes, Melody disappeared and my grandmother appeared. It happened so quickly, I felt dizzy.

Grammy Tammy didn't waste time floating. She gravitated to the carpet and faced me solemnly. ''Where did that scamp go?''

''I don't know,'' I answered, feeling helpless.

''That wild child! Doesn't she realize how serious running away is?''

''I'm not sure,'' I said nervously. ''But I told her about the earth pass you gave me and I urged her to leave by Friday.''

Grammy looked relieved. ''Thank you, Miranda. It's

nice to have one sensible granddaughter. What did Melody say when you told her?''

I bit my lip. ''Uh . . . she loved the earth pass. But I don't think she plans to return when it expires. She doesn't believe in shadow ghosts.''

''What! That's ridiculous! She's heard stories about them since she was little.''

''She thinks the stories are fairy tales.''

''Fairy tales! Of all the silly notions!'' Grammy exclaimed. ''I hope you warned Melody she could end up being a shadow ghost.''

''Well . . . not exactly. Maybe they aren't real . . . I don't know what to believe.''

Grammy wagged her finger at me. ''Believe me, young lady. Melody is in danger, and I can't protect her anymore. I've tried, but she won't let me. I can't force her to come home, so it's up to you to save your twin. Convince her to return to Ghostland before it's too late.''

Then Grammy vanished.

''Too late, too late, too late . . .'' Grammy's warning echoed in my ears, and I sank wearily to the floor.

I didn't know what to do . . . who to believe.

And even if I wanted to convince Melody to return to Ghostland, I didn't know how. She refused to leave until she had fun on earth.

I'd already helped her get a picnic, but I couldn't hold a sleepover in this small house. And I didn't know if Mom would let me change my birthday party from Saturday to Friday. I'd have to wait until tomorrow to find out.

So what could I do now?

Wait! Maybe there was a way. . . .

An idea popped into my head, and I quickly left the room.

I walked past the living room, where sports fans stared at the TV, and headed for the kitchen. Once there, I reached for the phone and punched seven numbers.

One ring. Two rings. Three—

"Hello," a girl answered.

"Diane? It's me. Miranda."

"Hi, Miranda. Isn't this kind of late? What's up?"

"There's something I have to ask you. Something important."

"Sure. What is it?"

I gripped the phone tightly, took a deep breath. "Can we have a sleepover at your house?"

"A sleepover?" She paused, as if thinking. "Sure! I love slumber parties. And I know my parents will say it's okay. We could have it on Friday—"

I was hoping to reschedule my birthday for Friday, so I said, "How about Wednesday? It'll give us something fun to do in the middle of spring vacation."

"Wednesday?" Diane repeated. "I guess that would be okay. I'll check with Mom." The phone thudded as Diane left, and I waited.

A few minutes later, Diane returned with good news. And when I hung up the phone it was all set.

Diane and I would host a sleepover on Wednesday.

Several girls from school would be invited . . . and my ghost twin would invisibly tag along, too.

Melody's wish for a sleepover would be granted.

Six

SIX

I woke up early Monday morning excited about the sleepover. I couldn't wait to tell Melody.

And I would have told her—if she had showed up.

But a few hours went by and no Melody. My wacky twin was probably sharing a cloud ride with Jeremy or magically making his toys dance around his playpen. I could only guess. The one thing I knew for sure was Melody wasn't here.

And when I overheard Aunt Mary planning a family baseball game, I knew I'd waited around long enough. Without a ghostly double to zap in and hit home runs, I was in trouble.

So I got permission from Aunt Mary to go over to Diane's house, then I left.

It was sleepover planning pow-wow time!

"We'll make invitations on my computer," Diane suggested, after ushering me into her bedroom. Neat shelves with lots of computer gadgets took up two walls. Opposite was a large bed with a frilly white canopy that matched the ruffled window curtains.

''Are we going to mail invitations?'' I asked, standing behind Diane while she booted her computer up.

Her short dark hair breezed across her shoulders as she shrugged. ''No. There isn't enough time. We'll have to hand deliver them. But we're only inviting six girls, so it won't be too much work.''

I nodded. ''I'll deliver three and so will you.''

''Yeah.'' She hit more buttons on her keyboard. ''A sleepover will jazz up spring vacation. I'm glad you suggested it.''

''Me, too. I just wish I could host it myself. But there's hardly room for me in the Drews' crowded house. You're a super friend to hold it here,'' I said sincerely.

And for a moment I wanted to confide in Diane—tell her my secret reason for wanting a sleepover.

''Diane,'' I would say, ''last October my ghost twin popped into my life. She looks exactly like me, but we're very different. She's outgoing, exciting, and not afraid of anything. She's great! And she really wants a sleepover. So she'll pretend to be me part of the night and I'll probably hide out in your bathroom. But if it will help my twin, I don't mind.''

Of course I said no such thing. Melody had warned me I must keep her a secret. There were people like my sixth grade teacher, Augusta Wynde, whose goal in life was to unmask ghosts to the world. But this would upset the balance of ghosts and humans. Ghosts were only allowed to associate with humans in special cases—like twin sisters who needed each other.

Diane hit more computer keys. ''I'd thought we'd invite Amber, Tiffany, and Betty Jo.''

''Don't forget Cheryl and Judith.''

"Great! That makes six."

"No, it doesn't." I wrinkled my brows, wondering how a smart girl like Diane could make such a simple mistake. "I counted five: Amber, Tiffany, Betty Jo, Cheryl, and Judith."

Diane typed a seven-letter name that flashed dark on her grayish screen. "And Heather. Since she's your stepsister now, I figured we should invite her, too."

I almost shouted, "No way!"

Instead I tightened my lips and remembered how Heather had acted like *my* mother belonged to her. I didn't want Heather at the sleepover. Besides, if she were there it would be harder to switch places back and forth with Melody. Heather had already seen us together once. If she saw us again, she might guess the truth. And I couldn't let that happen.

So I spoke carefully, "Heather doesn't like girl parties. She'd rather kick balls with her brothers or assemble car parts. She'd never giggle about cute boys or play Truth or Dare."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Diane erased Heather's name with microchip magic. The computer hummed mechanically, as if satisfied with itself. "So who else do we invite?"

I just shrugged. "We've already invited most of the girls in our class, except—"

A name burst like fireworks in my head, and I grinned.

Diane must have exploded some mental fireworks of her own, because she grinned, too.

We both sang out, "Camille Glitzenstein!"

Diane typed in Camille's name, and our list was completed.

We spent a fun hour laughing and teasing while Diane used dynamic computer fonts and graphics to make fantastic invitations. They turned out so cute that Diane and I each kept one for ourselves. I planned to put mine on my dresser mirror where I could admire it for a long time.

Next we planned sleepover activities.

"I have a Twister game we can play," Diane suggested, keying in a bold heading of GAMES AND ACTIVITIES, and adding the word "Twister."

"That's good," I agreed. "And I can bring some beauty stuff from Mom's salon for makeovers. I'm not a professional like Mom, but I can do facials and acrylic fingernails."

When we had two pages of activities and game ideas, it was time for me to go home.

"I want to get back before Mom returns from her honeymoon," I told Diane. "I'd like to do something special for her. Maybe make a cake or a welcome banner."

Diane twirled to face me in her desk chair. "My Print Shop program can design terrific banners. Do you want me to design one for you?"

I nodded eagerly. "Yes. That would be great!"

The banner *did* turn out great. Bold, dynamic letters spelled out: WELCOME HOME KATHERINE AND DONOVAN.

After saying good-bye to Diane, I pocketed the three invitations I would deliver after dinner tonight. Then I headed for home.

I almost tripped over one of Adam's toy cars as I entered the house, but I managed to steady myself. Then I headed for the kitchen in search of thumbtacks.

I noticed a sweet pastry aroma. I thought Aunt Mary

must be baking homemade rolls or some yummy dessert, though the idea of rowdy Aunt Mary cooking seemed weird. It was hard to imagine her without a whistle around her neck, wearing running shoes, and bouncing a ball in her hands. Probably she grew up in the old days when women had to cook, before TV dinners and microwave ovens.

But when I stepped into the kitchen, it wasn't Aunt Mary slaving over a hot oven. *It was Heather!*

I gasped and stared in amazement. Heather wore an apron over her jeans and her flyaway blond hair was pulled back into a neat braid. No grime or grease on her arms, either.

"Heather?" I mumbled, puzzled. "I thought you were Aunt Mary."

"Nope. She's out teaching the boys baseball hand signals."

"What are you doing?"

Heather gave an embarrassed smile. "Baking a cake."

I almost choked. Something weird was going on. Tomboy Heather didn't have a domestic bone in her sturdy body.

And a scary thought occurred to me. Had Melody put a ghostly spell on my stepsister? Hocus-pocus alacazam and a bully turns into Betty Crocker. Was it possible?

"Why are you baking a cake?" I asked nervously.

Heather wiped her hands on a ruffled apron. "I felt like it."

"But . . . but why?"

She shrugged. "Guess I'm in a baking mood."

I shivered. This was sounding more and more like

magical mischief. *Melody, what have you done this time?*

"Uh, do you need any help?"

"Nope. I got it under control. You'd just get in my way. Today's a special day and I want everything to be just right."

A light went off in my head, and I realized what was going on. Melody hadn't zapped Heather with any hocus-pocus. No magic was involved. Donovan and Mom were coming home soon, and Heather was scheming to impress *my* mother.

Which bugged me.

My father had a new family . . . and now so did my mother.

I was like an orphan.

But as I put up my banner in the living room, I felt more hopeful. It looked great over the couch. Mom was sure to be impressed. Then she'd remember that I was her real daughter, and Heather was just a "step."

A few hours later, I heard the sound of a car door. I jumped off the couch, the mystery I'd been reading falling to the carpet. Mom and Donovan were home!

And the first thing Mom saw as she walked in was my banner.

"What a nice surprise! How thoughtful! Who made it?" she asked, setting an overnight case down.

I smiled proudly. "I did—with Diane's help."

Mom opened her arms wide and held me. The hug was like a bandage to my heart, and I pressed closely against my mother.

"I missed you, Mom."

She kissed my cheek. "I missed you, too. But I'm sure you had fun with Aunt Mary."

''Fun isn't really the best word.''

Mom hugged me tighter. ''Well, I had a fabulous time. Donovan and I paddle wheeled on Lake Tahoe, soaked in hot tubs, and walked around the casinos.''

Adam, Davey, and Eddie rushed into the room, jumping around Donovan and tugging on him. ''Did you get us anything?'' they asked. ''What'd ya get us?''

Mom and Donovan exchanged a warm look that was more romantic than a book of poetry. And as quickly as I'd felt a part of my Mom's life, I felt shut out.

''We bought T-shirts for everyone, even Aunt Mary,'' Donovan said.

Suddenly Heather burst into the room and shouted, ''Attention everyone! I made a cake for the bride and groom!''

Heather came forward holding the sorriest, ugliest cake I'd ever seen in my life. It was lopsided with frosting smeared on like rough cement. I could do better than that blindfolded. Heck—little Jeremy could do better! I almost laughed, except I kind of felt sorry for Heather.

Mom and Donovan exchanged one of *those* looks.

Then Mom left me and rushed over to Heather. She took the cake and flashed a gigantic smile. ''It's beautiful! Oh, Heather! You did a fantastic job.''

I blinked in confusion. Mom had said my banner was ''nice'' and ''thoughtful''—but she thought Heather's gross cake was ''beautiful'' and ''fantastic!'' Did Mom need glasses or something? Couldn't she see that dog food looked better than Heather's cake?

And Mom wasn't the only one who praised Heather. Donovan, Aunt Mary, and even the boys complimented Heather.

No one paid any attention to me.

No one cared.

And no one noticed when I ripped my banner from the wall, tossed it in the garbage, and ran out of the room.

Seven

I had only been outside for a few minutes when the sliding door to the backyard opened and Mom stepped through it. In her hands was the crumpled banner.

"Miranda, why did you throw this away?" she asked softly, sitting down on the grass and slipping a warm arm around my shoulders.

I wiped away a tear that tickled my nose. "You . . . you already had a cake. You didn't need my banner." *Or me,* I thought.

Mom held me close to her chest and stroked my hair. "Oh, Miranda. I love your banner."

"It's just paper."

"No. It's much more than that. Since you made it, it's a priceless artistic masterpiece." Mom sighed and added, "Have you been feeling left out?"

I nodded. "A little."

"I'm sorry. I've been so concerned with winning Don's children over that I'd forgotten your feelings."

"I—I thought I would like a big family, but I don't fit in," I admitted softly. "There's no room for me here."

"You're wrong. There's always room for you right here . . . in my arms." And she hugged me again.

"But not in Heather's bedroom."

"It's your bedroom, too."

I sighed. "How can I fit into a space crammed with Heather's personality? The part of me that's *me* will get lost."

"The room *is* crowded. I'll talk with Don about it. Maybe we'll come up with a solution."

Mom caressed my cheek, and I loved the soft touch of her hand. And words that had been bottled up came pouring out. "It's not just the room," I tried to explain. "It's Heather. It's like she's your special girl now."

"You're my special girl, Miranda. And you always will be."

"But you're so nice to her."

I glanced up at Mom's face and saw a glimmer of tears. "Honey, once I had two girls . . . before your sister's accident. And believe me, there's room in my heart for two daughters."

Mom almost never spoke of Melody. I used to think it was because she didn't remember, but now I wondered if it was because she remembered *too* much.

I leaned forward, my elbows brushing across cool grass. "Do you think about Melody often?"

"Every day. I can feel her in my soul. Sometimes these feelings are so real, I imagine I can see her."

"She looks just like me."

Mom arched her brow as if puzzled. Then she smiled gently. "I'm sure she would have if she had lived. When you two were little, you were identical."

"Did you ever get us mixed up?"

"Only once. Somehow, Melody put on one of your

outfits and held your favorite stuffed giraffe. She was barely two years old, and yet I had the oddest feeling she was pretending to be you on purpose. Of course, she was too little to understand what she was doing.''

I giggled. ''Oh, she understood all right. Melody loves to play pranks.''

''Huh?'' Mom's gray eyes blinked. ''What do you mean by that? Your sister has been gone for almost ten years.''

''Gone, but impossible to forget.''

Mom gave me a curious look, then stood, pulling me up with her. ''Let's go back in. I'd better eat some of Heather's cake. I hope it tastes better than it looks. Oh, I didn't mean to say that! Please, don't tell your stepsister.''

I grinned and squeezed my mother's hand. ''Oh, I won't.''

And I thought happily, *My life has changed big time lately, but one thing will never change: the special relationship between Mom and me.*

Everyone crowded around the wooden dining table and had cake. I was surprised that Heather's dopey lopsided cake actually tasted good. And with four hungry males—plus Aunt Mary!—begging for seconds, the cake vanished quickly.

Like magic.

Magic. This small word had taken a whole new meaning since my twin popped into my life.

After dinner, while the others said good-bye to Aunt Mary, I sat alone in my room and wondered again where my twin was.

''Melody,'' I whispered. ''Melody, where are you?''

Over and over I called her name, but there was no reply.

I sank on my bed and my stomach churned with worries.

I hadn't seen Melody all day, and I was afraid I might never see her again. Why wasn't she answering?

My gaze fell to a cardboard box on the floor. It held my figurine collection . . . and Melody's earth pass. According to Grammy Tammy, the pass would expire in four days. But according to Melody, that didn't matter. She didn't care if her time ran out because she didn't believe in shadow ghosts.

And I wanted to believe my twin.

Besides, I'd love it if Melody stayed on earth for a long time. Days, weeks, months—or at least until Saturday so that she could get her third wish.

I'd asked Mom to celebrate my birthday a day early, but she flatly refused. "I'll be too busy at home and at the salon. You'll just have to wait until Saturday."

I wanted to tell her that I didn't mind waiting—it was Melody who wouldn't wait. Instead, I'd just nodded and told Mom I understood. But I was very disappointed.

I had really hoped to share my birthday with Melody. Our birth had been a shared event, so it was only right that we turned twelve together. I could imagine her joy in ripping open wrapped gifts and playing silly party games. It'd be so fun!

But if Melody stayed until Saturday, she'd get in big trouble with Ghostland. And I would have failed Grammy.

Sighing, I tossed the pillow on my bed and walked over to my dresser. Since the room was crowded with

Heather's cluttered stuff, it was only two small steps from my bed to my dresser.

Below my oval dresser mirror, next to my makeup case, were four computer-made sleepover invitations. One envelope was mine as a special keepsake, and the other three for Judith, Cheryl, and Tiffany.

I'd almost forgotten I had to deliver invitations today.

I'd better hurry before it got dark.

After getting permission from Mom, I left.

My first stop was a brick house at the end of my street. Judith Danvers was a tall girl with fine honey-blond hair, and she answered the door herself. She was thrilled by the invitation, and checked with her parents to see if she could spend Wednesday night at Diane's.

Yes, she could!

One down, two to go.

Next, I walked two blocks to Cheryl Ames's cute white and pink house. Pots of hanging flowers and wicker chairs made the porch seem cheerful and inviting. But there was no inviting reply. After several knocks, I realized no one was home.

Darn. Now what should I do?

I knocked a dozen more times, then finally gave up and decided to leave the invitation propped on the doorknob. That way Cheryl would be sure to find it.

My final stop was six blocks away in an older neighborhood that used to be very elegant. But times had changed, and most of the multistoried luxurious homes had for-sale signs poking out of their scruffy lawns like ugly pimples.

Tiffany Tso's old Victorian mansion was the exception. I admired her lovely yellow, chocolate-brown, and

forest-green home. A cheerful oasis in a semideserted neighborhood. And luckily for me, Tiffany was there.

Her ebony eyes shined with excitement as I handed her the invitation. "For me!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah. I hope you can come."

Paper ripped and Tiffany gave an excited squeal. "A sleepover at Diane's. Super! And in just two days! I know my parents will say it's okay, but I'll have to check. Wait a sec."

"Sure," I said, my hand holding the screen door open.

When Tiffany returned, her smile was huge.

She could go!

Success. Two out of three wasn't bad, and I practically skipped away from Tiffany's house.

The sun was sinking behind faraway clouds, and I hoped I could reach home before it became totally dark. I turned at the end of Tiffany's street, hoping to take a short cut through a graveled road. A crooked sign caught my attention.

SCORPIO STREET.

I shivered, although I didn't know why. Something about the word *scorpio* made me nervous. It was just a zodiac sign. I was an Aries and Diane was a Scorpio. Yet the deadly insect scorpion came to my mind, and I shivered again.

I'd never been a brave person, and the way my heart pounded proved it—especially when I saw the house on the corner.

31 Scorpio Street.

Yuck! The towering, sprawling building was the ugliest, most frightening house I'd ever seen. Really spooky.

And its peaked dormer windows seemed to stare down at me like evil eyes.

If ever there was a haunted house, this was it.

I'll bet even my twin would be scared here. I sure was. I had never been down this street before, and now that I'd seen this gruesome place, I'd never come back.

But as I walked past the massive barred gate, I heard a small cry. I stopped in my tracks. What was that?

It had sounded like a kitten's cry, and I paused by a street lamp and looked around. My fingers wrapped around wrought iron. I wanted to run away, but I waited and listened carefully.

"Mew . . . Mew . . ." the wind carried the cry again, and it seemed to be coming from a thick patch of oleander bushes.

"Kitty? Here, kitty . . ." I called softly.

I left the comforting yellow glow of the streetlight and walked to the gate. Pressing my palms against the spiked bars, I scanned the weeded yard. Branches rustled, and something moved.

I gasped.

Two bright blue eyes glowed from the bushes.

"Kitty?" I called again, barely able to make out a small silvery shape. Yes, it was a cat. Probably a blue-eyed Siamese. A breeze sprang up, shifting leaves and shadows, and the shining eyes vanished.

Chilling bumps raised on my arms as I shivered.

This was not a normal shiver.

And I remembered Melody saying she got ghost bumps whenever she sensed another ghost. Were the bumps on my arms from the cold . . . or something else?

"Don't be silly," I told myself. "Your twin may be a ghost, but you're just a normal girl with a big imagina-

tion. So you saw a Siamese cat. No reason to freak out.''

Lamplight and twilight made strange shadows on the grass and sidewalk. I watched dark shapes move as wind breezed through leaves. Trees, bushes, and weeds seemed to have a life of their own. And the wind howled through branches; hollow noises that sounded oddly like a human voice . . . a voice that called out a familiar name.

''Mel . . . Mel . . . Melody,'' the wind whispered.

And instantly I knew I was not alone.

My fingers froze as they clutched the massive gate. And I felt bewitched; unable to do anything but wait, wonder, and watch.

On the weeded lawn a night-black shape shifted and grew into a human form. I could see the murky outline of arms, legs, and a head, but nothing more.

There was no face. Just a shadowy form.

It glided toward me, its voice stronger than the wind, and boyish as it called, ''Melody . . . Melody.''

''No! Go away!'' I shouted. ''I'm not Melody.''

The foggy shape paused and spoke again, ''I have seen you in a dream.''

I stepped back, hugging myself so I wouldn't fall apart. ''No! Stay away!''

Smokelike fingers pointed toward me and the shape gave a hollow laugh. ''You are afraid of *me?*''

''Please don't hurt me,'' I whimpered, hoping the gate that kept me out would keep *him* in.

He laughed again. ''I am the only one hurting. Melody, you are quite a silly ghost.''

''I'm not a ghost!''

''Do not try to fool me. I have heard of your wild

pranks. You are Melody . . . and you will be like me soon.''

I stared hard, trying to see his face. But there was no face, just a murky outline and a boyish voice. Not a voice to fear; instead, I felt sympathy. Although I wasn't sure why.

''Melody is my twin,'' I cried out. ''I'm Miranda.''

''Miranda? You are human?'' he asked, surprised.

''Yes! And I really have to go!''

''Tell Melody I wait for her.''

''But who are you?'' I demanded. ''*What* are you?''

He laughed, a harsh sound that echoed through the spooky yard. And then he answered simply, ''I am a shadow ghost.''

Eight

Shadow ghosts *did* exist!

Grammy Tammy had been telling the truth!

I told myself this over and over as I hurried away from the creepy house on Scorpio Street. I'd actually met a shadow ghost. I wondered who he was and what he'd done to deserve such a lonely punishment. Had he run away from Ghostland? Had he broken too many rules? Had his earth pass expired?

I would probably never know. Besides, I was more worried about Melody. She was in serious trouble. She would be banished to the shadows at midnight Friday if she didn't return to Ghostland. Time was running out for my twin.

If I didn't do something, her curly red hair, green eyes, and mischievous smile would fade to foggy gray. Her laughter, high spirits, and soul would be gone forever. And she'd wish she had never complained about homework or rules. But by then it would be too late.

I had to warn Melody right away!

I was so exhausted from running that when I reached

the chain-link fence surrounding my yard, I leaned weakly against it. Sweet scents from honeysuckle and the tangy nip of spring air surrounded me. I paused to catch my breath, and wondered how I could find Melody.

Too bad I couldn't just call Dad's house and ask if Melody was there. But that would never work. So I had no choice but to wait for Melody to pop in.

The house was quiet except for TV noises from the family room. As I walked down the hall, I glimpsed Donovan, Mom, and the boys watching TV.

I knew it was dumb to hope to find Melody waiting for me in my bedroom, but I hoped anyway. Instead of my ghost sister, though, I found my stepsister.

Heather sat hunched over her desk, a thin paintbrush in her left hand, carefully dabbing red paint on the fender of a plastic model car.

"Miranda?" she questioned, not bothering to turn around.

"Yeah," I said, between ragged breaths. I had never run so fast in my life. But then, I'd never met a shadow ghost before.

"Where ya been?"

"Uh . . . out seeing some friends," I answered carefully. If I told Heather I'd been delivering sleepover invitations, she'd probably tease me.

"Want to see my model?" she asked, turning in her chair to face me. "It's a 1957 Chevy Coupe. Really cool."

I glanced at her wall shelves; two rows of sport trophies and four rows of plastic and metal car replicas. "Don't you already have enough models?"

"Nope. Putting them together is like figuring out a

puzzle. I love it. Besides, I have lots of space on my shelves.''

I gritted my teeth. I didn't have *any* shelves, and she had more than she needed. I would be happy with even one. I would put all my favorite things on it: family photos, crystal perfume bottles, stuffed animals, and my glass figurines. Instead, my stuffed animals were crammed on top of my bed and my glass collection remained in its box.

I sighed, and turned to leave.

Since Melody wasn't here, there was no reason for me to stay. So I reached for the doorknob.

Heather called out, ''Wait! Where are you going?''

''I don't know. Maybe I'll watch TV.''

She pointed to a small TV propped on a round shelf across from her waterbed. ''You can stay here and watch TV with me. I'm almost done painting.''

Her TV. Her shelves. Her room.

I shook my head. ''I don't want to disturb you. Besides, there's something I have to do.''

''I could help you unpack your box,'' Heather put in. ''And if anything is broken, I can help you glue it back together.''

''Thanks, but not now.'' I gave her a curious look. I couldn't figure out why she was being so friendly. But I had more important things to worry about. I still needed to find Melody. And I had no idea how to contact her.

My throat was sore from running home, so I headed for the kitchen to get something cool to drink.

The kitchen was quiet and empty. No sign of a ghost. I flipped on the light and opened the refrigerator. Push-

ing aside a bowl of spaghetti, I reached for an orange juice carton.

Juice was the perfect liquid to soothe my aching throat. And I lifted the carton over a glass and poured. Juice spilled into the glass, filling it halfway. But then the flowing liquid stopped, as if frozen in place. And although my hand still held onto the carton, the juice suddenly gushed backward . . . gravity gone crazy! . . . and emptied back into the carton.

"Huh?" I muttered, perplexed to find my glass empty once again. "What's going on?"

"Boo!"

I whirled around, and saw her. Melody was floating over the fridge. Not floating exactly; more like horseback riding since she straddled a huge stuffed purple pony.

"Howdy, partner!" she greeted. "I've had the best day!"

"Well, I've had the worst," I grumbled. "So cut the hocus pocus and let me have some orange juice."

She giggled and instantly my glass was filled. "I'm sorry you had a bad day. But I'm here now to cheer you up. Wait till you hear what Jeremy and I did!"

"Shssh! Keep your voice down!"

"You *are* in a grumpy mood," she said, rocking back and forth on the toy pony.

"If I'm grumpy, it's because I've been worried sick about you. I called and called and called. But you didn't answer."

"I popped in to play with Jeremy and forgot the time. Ghosts don't wear watches. And I love the way Jeremy's mouth opens like a full moon whenever I show him magic. He's a super audience!"

"You should have told me where you were," I complained, putting my hands on my hips and frowning up at my twin. Why couldn't Melody act more responsible? And why did she seem to have more fun with Jeremy than she had with *me?*

"Are you mad at me?" she asked, zapping away the pony and floating down next to me.

"No. But we have to talk."

"Right-o! And gosh do I have a lot to talk about. Jeremy is starting to say sentences. Mel-Mel fly—that's what he said today. So naturally, I took him for a pony flight."

"I hope no one saw you."

"Relax. I vanish whenever Felicity or Dad checks on Jeremy. And I plan to tag along invisibly when they go to the zoo on Sunday."

I felt my skin grow cold and afraid. "Sunday? But Melody, you have to go home on Friday."

"No way!" She shook her auburn curls and stubbornly pursed her lips. "I told you I want to have fun before I go back. And I won't be scared by fairy tales of stupid shadow ghosts."

I shivered. "It's not a fairy tale. You're in danger."

"Don't be silly. I'm a ghost. Nothing can happen to me."

"Yes, it can," I said gravely. "I saw him myself . . . or what I could see of him. He didn't have a face or body. He was like smoke."

"Who?" Melody demanded. "What are you talking about?"

I reached out and grasped her cool arm. "I met a shadow ghost tonight."

Melody stared at me in astonishment. "Impossible!

You're just trying to scare me. Did Grammy put you up to this?''

''No. It really happened. The shadow boy thought I was you at first. I think that's why he spoke to me.''

''But there's no such thing as a shadow ghost!''

''Yes, there is, and I can prove it. Zap over to 31 Scorpio Street and you can meet him yourself.''

She shook her head. ''It'd just be a waste of magic. Besides, I'm not going back to Ghostland so soon.''

''Melody, you can't let your earth pass expire!'' I exclaimed, thinking of the golden paper which was still hidden in my figurine box.

She frowned. ''I refuse to go back until I do more fun earth stuff. One picnic wasn't enough.''

I realized I hadn't told her about the sleepover yet, so I quickly filled her in.

Her frown curved into a half-smile. ''A sleepover will be wonderful! Thanks! You're the best sister in the galaxy.''

''I just want you to be happy . . . and safe.''

''I am happy, and I promise you I'll be safe. Just don't ask me to leave too soon.''

''We have four days until the pass expires. You'll have had a picnic and sleepover. That should be enough.''

''But what about your birthday party?'' she asked in a soft, sad voice. ''I don't want to miss it.''

''You can't risk staying past Friday night,'' I said firmly, although I wished with all my heart that we could share our twin birthday.

A determined look crossed her face and she glanced away. ''Some risks are worth taking.''

"No, they aren't," I insisted, gripping my glass tightly.

She just shrugged and didn't reply—which worried me.

I finished drinking my juice. "Let's go get the earth pass," I suggested. "You'll have to zap invisible so Heather won't see you."

"Sure!" she replied, and then she vanished. Although I couldn't see her, I knew she was right beside me.

When I stepped into the bedroom, I saw Heather's car model half-finished on her desk. A paintbrush stuck out from a jar of paint, but Heather's chair was empty.

When I turned toward my side of the room, I gasped.

Heather knelt on the floor, beside my box, and in her hand was something flat and shiny.

"Miranda, what's this?" she asked, waving her golden discovery in the air.

Heather had found the earth pass!

Nine

HING

"What are you doing in my box?" I demanded.

"Checking to see what's broken. Only one glass kitten, and it's too smashed for me to glue it back together."

"You had no right to snoop into my stuff!"

Heather rose slowly, her mouth twisted in a scowl and her blue eyes narrowed. "I was just trying to help."

"I don't need your help!"

"That's fine with me!"

"Give me back the paper."

"Why should I? You don't appreciate when I try to be nice, so no more being nice. Maybe I'll just rip it in half!" she threatened, her fingers poised for destruction.

"*No!* You'll wreck everything!" I reached out and tried to grab the earth pass.

But Heather was taller than me, so I didn't have a chance. She dangled the pass above my head. "Why do you want it so much?"

"I just do. Give it to me."

"Maybe. But you'd better ask politely. I don't like it

when you boss me around. I'm s'posed to do the bossing.''

''Heather, will you please give me the paper,'' I said slowly, trying not to lose my temper.

She jerked back her hand. ''I have to think about it. It's not like we're friends, anymore. Since the wedding, you don't even like me around. You'd rather go hang out with Diane.''

I stared in surprise. Heather sounded jealous. Did Heather resent my friendship with Diane the way I resented Heather's attachment to my mother? Was it possible? But Heather always acted so rough and bossy, like she wore armor around her feelings.

Maybe when her guard was down, she was sensitive like me.

But sensitive or not, I had to get the earth pass from her before something terrible happened.

''What is this thing, anyway?'' Heather asked as she tugged, rubbed, and studied the paper. ''Touching it makes my fingers tingle. It's stronger than paper or foil. And it's so shiny like there's a light bulb on inside.''

''Hand it over,'' I demanded.

Heather's eyes were round with puzzlement. ''But what is—''

There was a flash of light and instantly Heather froze in place; her hands outstretched, her mouth open, and her head bent over the pass. And beside her stood a red-haired ghost.

''Melody!'' I cried in relief. ''It's about time. I was afraid Heather would ruin your pass.''

Melody casually plucked the golden paper from Heather's open palm. ''I'll take that,'' she said with a grin, slipping it in her pocket.

I stared guiltily at Heather. "Is she okay?"

"Right-o as starshine," Melody answered. "And she won't remember anything when she unfreezes. Which will happen in just thirty seconds. Young ghosts have limited powers."

"At least the pass is safe. So you can stay until Friday night without getting in trouble," I said, sinking on a corner of my bed. Magic was exhausting!

"Maybe." Melody shifted her gaze, as if hiding something.

Heather's finger wiggled and I jumped. "Melody, you better zap out of here. I'll deal with Heather."

Melody chuckled. "I can think of amusing ways to deal with an evil stepsister."

"Heather is not evil!" I snapped, a bit surprised at my quick anger.

"But I thought you didn't like her."

I shrugged. "So did I . . . and I was wrong. She's been nicer lately."

Melody lifted off the carpet and squealed. "Heather's snapping out of it! I'd better go. See you tomorrow."

Then my ghost sister vanished, leaving me alone with my stepsister.

Heather stood there, slowly thawing out, a confused look on her face. "What happened?"

I faked a yawn and reached for my pink cotton nightgown. "Nothing. It's late. I'm going to sleep."

"But I remember holding something . . . a gold paper." She looked at her palms. "Where did it go?"

"What go?" I drew back my covers and shrugged. "You must have dreamed it."

"I'm awake. And I know something weird hap-

pened.'' She stared at me suspiciously. ''Lots of weird stuff has been going on lately.''

''I don't know what you're talking about.''

''You never do.'' Heather sank deep in her water bed, the sloshing noise mingling with her own sigh. ''Why don't you like me, Miranda?''

I stared at her in shock. ''What? Of course I like you. You're my stepsister.''

Heather's head drooped, her wispy blond hair covering her face. ''I'd rather be your friend.''

I didn't know what to say. The nice part of me wanted to reassure Heather. But that wouldn't be the truth. And the honest part of me hated lying.

''Since we're related now, it's probably better if we had different friends,'' I said carefully.

''Like you have Diane.''

''Yes. And you should have a best friend, too.''

Heather's lower lip quivered. ''Oh, sure. Like any one of those prissy girls from school wants to hang around me. The only girl who ever liked me was you. At least, you used to.''

Guilt spread through me like a painful disease. I remembered what Mom had said about understanding Heather. I tried to imagine how it would feel to be the largest girl in school. I'd stand out alone. Add to that growing up with no mother or sisters and being more skilled at lubing a car than applying makeup. I wouldn't know how to dress, act, or talk like other girls. I'd really be alone. Maybe I'd even start bossing kids around just so they'd notice me.

I went over and sat down next to Heather. ''I didn't know how you felt. Maybe we can be sisters *and* friends. I do like you. Honestly.''

"Then why didn't you invite me to the sleepover?" She pointed to my invitation stuck on the mirror. "I've been waiting all day for you to give me an invitation. But you never did."

"I didn't think you'd want to go."

"You should have asked."

"But you're always saying that sleepovers are for wimps and sissies. You hate girl parties."

"Not really." She gave a lopsided frown. "I've never been to one. No one ever invited me."

"I'm sorry, Heather. But you're wrong about no one wanting to invite you. I do." And I meant it.

I stood and walked to the mirror. I reached for my invitation, took it down, then held it out to Heather. "Here. This is for you."

Her blue eyes shone with hope. "But this was yours."

"No. I was saving it for someone special." I flashed a warm smile. "You."

She carefully held the invitation, unfolding it, and reading the computerized words.

When she smiled back at me, I felt kind of special, too.

I was so exhausted after a day of dealing with sisters—step and ghost—that I slept in till ten the following morning.

When I awoke, the only person around was Adam. He told me that Mom was working at the beauty salon, Donovan and Heather were at the auto shop, and Eddie and Davey were playing basketball.

Then Adam sprinted outside to join his brothers.

I ate a quick breakfast. Then I decided to enjoy hav-

ing the house to myself by taking a luxurious bath. I poured half a bottle of bubble bath in the steaming tub and added three tiny balls of scented soap.

Slowly, I sank into my sudsy water heaven.

A second later I heard a popping sound and looked up to find Melody floating cross-legged over the sink.

"Hi, Sis! That *is* you in all those foamy bubbles, isn't it? I can only see your head," she said with a giggle. "You look like a whipped ice cream dessert and your red hair is like the cherry on top."

"You're just lucky that ghosts don't need baths," I teased. "Or you'd look like a goofy dessert, too."

"Never!" She floated over the tub and grinned down at me. "So what are we doing today?"

"If you promise not to play any hocus pocus pranks, you can go with me to Diane's house later. More sleepover planning. I'm going to make questions for Truth or Dare and Diane has this cool idea for a detective game."

"Sounds great! I can't wait to enjoy my first sleepover! How many other girls will be there?"

"About six—including Heather. After you left last night, we talked. I think we'll get along better now."

"Will she stop bossing you around?"

I grinned. "Probably not, but I can hope. Miracles that big don't happen overnight."

"So who else is coming to the sleepover?"

"Diane, of course." I paused to rinse strawberry shampoo from my hair. "Cheryl and Amber can't make it. But Tiffany, Betty Jo, Judith, and Camille can."

"Camille? Isn't she that dynamite dark-haired girl who hosted the Halloween party?"

"None other."

"I liked her style. And she gave a terrific party!"

I winked and added, "Complete with a genuine ghost."

We continued talking as I got dressed. Since Diane didn't expect me for another hour, I told Melody we could do whatever she wanted—I didn't care what. Just being with Melody was exciting. I never knew what she'd come up with. Hanging out with a ghost is anything but boring.

"Let's go for a ride," Melody suggested.

"What kind?"

She grinned, and led me to the backyard. Then she zapped in two over-sized purple stuffed ponies. I didn't ask where they came from. I didn't want to know. "Hop on, Sis. Then hold on tight for a pony flight."

There was a swoosh sound and I felt dizzy. I hugged my pony's neck and realized I was no longer on the ground. My feet dangled in the air and my heart pounded. I was afraid of a lot of things, including heights.

"Melody!" I called, holding on for dear life. "Help!"

A breeze carried her laugh my way, and she flew even higher. She rocked back and forth on her stuffed pony, not at all afraid of falling. I decided to be brave like my sister. I'd try to have fun without any fears.

I forced a smile and rocked on my own pony. Then *swoosh!* I rose up and up and up, right behind my twin. It felt great! We circled over the neighborhood, soaring so high that only startled birds could see us.

"Flying makes me feel so free . . . like I could do anything," I called out to Melody.

"You can!" Melody exclaimed. "We can do anything we want."

"Except live together," I replied.

"Maybe we can do that, too."

I gave Melody a startled look. What did she mean by that? I started to ask her, but she zoomed up and I hurried after her.

We glided over a cloud, floating and just enjoying ourselves. The air was still, refreshing, and quiet. It was so peaceful up here, I wondered why birds even bothered to come down to the earth. Or ghosts.

"You're lucky you're a ghost," I told Melody. "Dumb things like sharing a room or getting used to a new family don't matter in your world."

"Boring stuff matters in Ghostland. According to my teachers, learning is the most important thing," she grumbled, pausing mid-air over a fluffy cloud.

The cloud tickled my toes as I paused beside my twin. "But when you learn things, you aren't reading facts from a boring book. Your teachers really lived in the past. I bet you learned to fly from Amelia Earhart."

"Wrong! I learned the right way—from the Wright brothers."

"Wow! That's so neat. I remember reading about them in my history book. Meeting them in person would have been better."

"It wasn't any big deal," Melody replied.

"You meet the coolest people. And best of all, you have Grammy Tammy. She's wonderful! And she really cares about you."

"But she doesn't remember what it was like to be young. She wants me to be a good little ghost. Which is hard for me sometimes."

"But you don't want to get in trouble," I told her quietly.

"Trouble may scare you, but it doesn't scare me." Then she frowned, and changed the subject by pointing out Diane's green and brown house far below. As we floated back to earth, I could sense that Melody was deep in thought.

And I grew afraid.

Melody hated following rules the way I hated sharing a messy room. I hoped she wouldn't do anything dumb like stay on earth after the pass expired.

Would she risk being sent to the shadows?

Ten

The following afternoon, Heather and I were getting ready for the sleepover.

My stepsister held up a huge, crumpled dark green shirt and asked, "What do you think?"

I stopped in the middle of folding a pair of jeans, and turned away from my suitcase. "About what?"

"My nightshirt. Is it okay for the sleepover?"

My first thought was that Heather had to be joking. Sure, she wore the grungy army-styled shirt to bed every night at home, but did she really plan to wear it to Diane's?

Oh, no! *She did!*

I looked at my own neat overnight case. My lavender pajama set was folded on top. Then I looked at the duffel bag Heather was stuffing her clothes into. Not even a real suitcase—but an army duffel bag!

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked roughly.

"Not at you. Your green shirt. Don't you have anything nicer for the sleepover . . . something more feminine?"

She tightened her fist around green cloth. "Feminine? You mean prissy and pink?"

I reminded myself that Heather's bully tone didn't scare me anymore. Not much, anyway.

I gulped. "It doesn't have to be pink. Mine is lavender."

"Lavender!" She made a sour face, then shrugged. "But if the other girls will be wearing sissy stuff, maybe I should, too."

I was relieved and surprised she gave in so easily. "Good idea," I said.

"But where am I going to get a nightgown? It's too late to go shopping. And anything of yours would be too small."

Her blue eyes clouded over, then she waved the green nightshirt and dumped it into her duffel bag. "Forget it! I didn't want to look dopey, anyway."

Her tone was tough, but her shoulders were hunched over and her voice was sad. I felt sorry for her—and guilty because I knew where she could borrow a nice yellow nightgown that would probably fit her.

But this nightgown belonged to my mother.

Of course, Mom would be happy to help Heather, and Heather would be happy to have Mom's help. But would I be happy?

I looked at Heather's sorrowful face. Was she afraid she wouldn't fit in at the sleepover? I knew what not fitting in felt like. I still didn't fit in with the Drews. They were noisy, outgoing, and athletic. I was quiet, shy, and a lightweight at sports. I'd needed help from a ghost to play a simple game of basketball.

But Heather didn't have any magic to help her.

All she had was me . . . and my mother.

Slowly I smiled and decided that helping Heather *would* make me happy.

So I told Heather about the perfect yellow nightgown, and we went to find Mom.

"Games, giggling, and gooey snacks," Heather grumbled as she chewed a slice of pepperoni pizza dripping in cheese. "Sleepovers are overrated."

"You seem to be enjoying that gooey pizza," I teased, knowing that my stepsister was having a good time. I guess she was just afraid to show it.

She shrugged, and stepped aside as Diane burst into the family room.

"Twister time!" Diane announced, holding up a long square box over her shiny dark hair. "Who wants to play?"

Physical games weren't my thing. I'd probably fall down and make a fool of myself. So while Heather and the four other girls volunteered to play, I kept quiet.

But I felt someone move next to me and suddenly an invisible hand clamped down over my mouth.

"I'll play Twister, too," a voice that sounded exactly like mine said.

That's when I realized my ghost twin had arrived.

The pressure released off my mouth, and I grumbled, "Thanks a lot, Melody."

She giggled. "You're welcome."

And before I could think of a good excuse to get out of playing, I was told to put my left hand on a blue spot.

Thirty minutes later, only three players remained on the spotted plastic sheet: Betty Jo, Tiffany, and me.

I was upside down, with my right hand on a green spot, my left hand on red, and both feet on yellow. I

was dizzy, nervous, and proud of myself for surviving this long.

Diane twirled the game spinner and called out, "Miranda's turn again. Right foot—red!"

I tilted my neck to look at the Twister sheet. To reach a red spot, I would have to lift my leg over Tiffany's arm and around Betty Jo's shoulder. But could I do it without falling over like a klutz?

I held my breath and eased my right foot off a yellow circle. I knew everyone was looking at me—including my invisible twin. I couldn't mess up!

"Go Miranda!" I heard Melody whisper. "You can do it!"

I concentrated really hard, shutting out voices and noises. My heart thudded and my muscles ached. Slowly, I arched my back and stretched my leg until my toe touched down on red.

I had done it!

"That's so cool, Miranda." Diane bent down near my head. "You're super flexible. You could be an Olympic gymnast!"

"Or a pretzel," Betty Jo teased from her twisted position next to me.

Tiffany giggled, lost her balance, slipped, and got tangled in Betty Jo's arms. Both girls fell over.

I was the winner!

"Way to go, Miranda!" Heather cheered, wiping pizza sauce from her chin.

And a ghost whispered near my ear, "On target, Sis! But I'm tired of watching. I want to take your place."

I stood, rolled my neck to ease the tight muscles, then sighed. I hated to leave when I was having fun, but Melody deserved to have fun, too. So I excused myself

and headed for Diane's walk-in closet. I had already decided this would be a safe place to hide.

As I turned down the hallway, my twin appeared at my side. She wore the same rose leggings and white flower-patterned shirt I did. "This is so thrilling! Although I wish you didn't have to stay in a closet."

I opened the door and switched on an overhead light. "So do I. At least this room is cozy and comfortable. And it's nicer than the last place I hid out. I never want to go into that gross restroom at Sutton Park again."

Melody giggled. "I promise you won't have to. I also promise I'll be back as soon as I've played some games. I won't make you wait long! Gotta zap!"

Then she vanished, and I was alone. Only this time I didn't even have Seymore the Spider to keep me company!

I sat against a wall and kept the door open a crack so I could hear what was happening in the family room.

Diane said something about "Bernie," so I guessed she was organizing the mystery game where everyone would split into mini detective groups and follow clues to solve Bratty Bernie's disappearance. Bratty Bernie was a stuffed panda teddy bear, and Diane had hidden him somewhere in the house. I'd offered to help create the clues, but she'd done them herself so I could play the game.

But it was my twin who now played the game, and I sat on a blue carpet, surrounded by rows of shoes and hanging clothes. The air was stuffy and I yawned. To keep awake, I counted the fruit designs on the wallpaper. Twenty-seven apples, thirty-one pears, twenty-two bananas . . .

I was midway through counting the grapes, when I

heard voices coming my way. I quickly squashed to the back of the small room, hiding behind a long tan coat.

"The royal pair had a full house," Camille said. "That's a weird clue. But I know what it means."

"What?" I overheard Judith ask.

"The key word is 'pair.' It can also be spelled p-e-a-r, like that dopey fruit wallpaper in Diane's room. Real tacky design. The Kampfers need to change decorators."

"I don't think they use one."

"Really?" Camille asked, astonished. "I thought everyone did."

"No one I know. Except you. Which I think is so cool," Judith added in admiration.

Sounding closer, Camille said, "I'll check the walls in here, you check the closet. The next clue to Bratty Bernie must be hidden here somewhere."

As the doorknob turned, I watched in fear. Please don't let them find me. It would be so embarrassing! I flattened up against the wall and wished I were invisible. There was no place to run. I was trapped.

My heart pounded as the door inched open. I could see Judith's fingers, then her hand, her arm—

"Wait!" Judith suddenly cried out, turning back to Camille. "Full house, royal, and pair are card game words! And I saw a deck of cards in the family room! I bet there's another clue hidden there!"

"You're right!" Camille exclaimed. "Let's go before anyone else figures it out!"

Then they left.

Whew! Thank goodness they were gone! I thought.

I sank down to the carpet and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Everything was okay—for now.

I was still sitting there twenty minutes later when Melody popped back in.

She grinned and announced, "We won! Heather and I found Bratty Bernie!"

"You teamed up with Heather?" I asked, surprised.

"She asked me to be her partner. I think she really admires me . . . I mean, you. Us! Anyway, we made an awesome team. She guessed a clue about baseball and I knew one about Houdini." Her green eyes sparkled with mischief. "He was one of my teachers. He taught Basic Illusion 101."

I stood and stretched my arms. "I'm just glad you're back. I'm tired of waiting—"

"Oh, I hear music!" Melody cut in excitedly, cupping her hand to her ear. "Diane is getting ready to start the dance contest! I can't wait to try out that new move Elvis showed me. I'll be back in a sec. Wait here for me!"

"But it's my turn—" I protested, as she waved, zapped, and vanished.

I groaned and sank back down on the blue carpet.

And then I did as my twin asked—I waited.

Once again.

I must have dozed off. When I opened my eyes, an entire hour had passed. And Melody was still pretending to be me!

I slipped out of the room and tiptoed down the hall. Quietly, I peeked into the family room.

What I saw made me grit my teeth in anger.

Melody had helped herself to *my* makeup kit, and she was brushing midnight maroon blush across Diane's

cheeks while the other girls watched. But doing makeovers was *my* job. Not Melody's!

Enough was enough!

I gave a low whistle and tried to catch my twin's attention. But her back was to me as she painted Diane's lips a glossy shade of plum red. I looked around, trying to figure out a way to contact Melody. Maybe I could throw something at her . . . something small and harmless.

I looked at the friendship bracelet on my wrist. Melody had won it at a Halloween party and given it to me. I smiled slowly, and slipped the bracelet off. Then I leaned forward and flung it. It landed right on Melody's neck. On target!

When she turned and saw me, her green eyes widened. She glanced around nervously. She made a quick movement with her hand and there was a sudden flash. All the girls in the room froze in place—except Melody and me.

"Miranda! What are you doing here? Someone might have seen you!" Melody cried, setting a tube of lip gloss down and retrieving my friendship bracelet. She strode over and held it out to me.

"I'm sick of hiding," I complained, slipping the rainbow bracelet back on. "We agreed to share the sleepover, but you've been me more than I've been me."

"I was having so much fun that I forgot about you."

"Thanks a lot," I said sarcastically.

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding sincere.

"Well, I'm here now. So I'll take over."

Melody glanced at the others who were stiff and still

like statues. "I'll zap invisible and you can finish the makeovers. You're better at it than I am, anyway."

I couldn't resist a smile. I may not be able to zap, freeze someone, or float, but I could give terrific makeovers. It was nice to be better at something than my twin.

I walked over and picked up the gloss Melody had used on Diane. I giggled at Diane's motionless face. Her lips were puckered together and only one lip shined bright plum red.

Nearby Camille's expression was funny, too. Her mouth curved down at the corners and her arms were crossed, as if she was annoyed she wasn't getting the makeover. She liked being the center of attention. She used smiles and flattery to get her way, but in truth, she was just as bossy as Heather.

Heather!

Why didn't I see her anywhere?

I looked around and counted the girls: Diane, Camille, Betty Jo, Judith, and Tiffany.

Where was Heather?

I heard a sound from the kitchen. I whirled around and learned the answer to my question.

Heather held a plate of barbecued chips as she walked forward. Suddenly she stopped and stared at the statue-still girls. Her blue eyes were huge, her jaw sagged, and her blond hair seemed to frizz from fear. Her plate tilted, and chips fluttered like fallen leaves to the carpet.

She gasped. "What's happened to everyone?"

"Heather! Let me explain!" I cried.

"Explain what? What's going on?" Then her gaze fell on Melody and me, and she gasped again. "I'm seeing double! Or there really are two of you!"

I felt sick to my stomach.

"What sort of horrible trick are you playing?" Heather demanded.

"It's not a trick. Melody is my sister."

"But your sister drowned!" Heather's voice rose and she stepped backward. "I must be dreaming! This can't be happening!"

"You're awake. Calm down. There's no reason to be afraid."

"I'm not afraid of anything!" she snapped. "I just want to know what's going on!" She pointed at the other girls. "Why aren't they moving?"

Melody answered, "They're just frozen."

"Frozen!" Heather yelled.

I looked at Melody. "Maybe you should freeze Heather, too."

"She's already seen us together," Melody said grimly. "We have to tell her the truth."

Heather interrupted, "What truth?"

I shook my head and frowned at Melody. "No! If we tell her about Ghostland, you'll be breaking another rule. I don't want you to get into trouble."

"I'm already in trouble."

Heather's gaze jumped back and forth between me and Melody. "You two really look alike. Which one is Miranda?"

"I am," I said wearily. "Melody is my identical twin."

"That's impossible! Unless she's a—"

"A ghost," Melody put in calmly. "That's precisely what I am."

Eleven

E|6^6N

"Ghosts don't exist!" Heather wailed, barbecued chips crunching beneath her feet as she staggered in shock.

Melody's green eyes sparkled. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"But you can't be a ghost! You aren't see-through or foggy. And if you died at age two, you should still be two years old!"

"Who says? I'm not a baby anymore. Just because I don't live on earth doesn't mean I can't grow up just like you."

Heather held her head as if it hurt. "You sound real. And you look as real as Miranda. I mean, you look exactly like Miranda!"

I cut in, "Because we're twins."

"*No!* It's impossible! Katherine told me about your twin drowning when you were little."

"Melody did drown," I said in frustration. "But now she lives in Ghostland with Grammy Tammy—"

"Who?" Heather interrupted.

"My grandmother."

''Another ghost?'' Heather asked skeptically.

''Yes.'' I glanced around the room. ''But there isn't time to explain everything now. The others will thaw out any second. Melody, can't you prove to Heather you're a ghost?''

''Right-o!'' Melody chuckled. ''I was able to convince you, wasn't I?''

''Yes—after you scared me to death.'' I nearly choked when I saw Camille's finger wiggle. ''Melody, your magic freeze is wearing off. Do something fast!''

Melody nodded, then grinned mischievously. ''You got it, Sis.'' Then she held up her hand, waved, and vanished.

Heather screamed and pointed to the empty air that had been my twin. ''Wh-where . . . Where did she go?''

''I'm over here!'' Melody sang out, flashing like a streak of lightning on the other side of the room.

''But how did you get there? And why are you floating?'' Heather cried in a shaky, scared voice. She shook her head in disbelief. ''She really is a ghost.''

I went over and patted her shoulder. ''I tried to tell you. After Melody drowned, she became a ghost, and has lived in Ghostland ever since. Now that you know our secret, you have to promise not to tell anyone.''

''Why shouldn't I tell?'' she retorted. ''I don't have to do anything I don't want.''

''If you don't keep our secret, Melody could get hurt.''

Heather's blue eyes narrowed. ''Ghosts can't get hurt, but humans can. Like when they're swept away in a whirlwind and dunked in a pool.''

Melody floated over to us, swirling above our heads.

"I'm sorry, Heather. I was only trying to help Miranda. Those were just harmless pranks."

"Pranks!" Heather exploded, her face red against her pale blond hair. "You guys haven't been playing fair! You made me think I was going crazy or that I needed glasses. Why should I keep *your* secret?"

Melody and I shared worried glances.

"I better zap out of here, or we'll really have trouble." Melody then breezed over to Heather and added, "I know you're mad at us, and I'm really sorry. But please don't tell anyone about Ghostland."

Heather crossed her arms stubbornly and didn't answer. She'd been scared, confused, and now she was angry. And who could blame her? In her place, I'd be angry, too.

Melody sighed, then vanished. And seconds later the other girls began to thaw out. They blinked and looked confused, but they didn't seem to realize anything weird had happened. And strangely, Heather didn't tell them differently.

So, I reached into my makeup case and finished giving Diane a makeover. As I highlighted her eyes and painted her lips, I snuck peaks at Heather. She acted like nothing weird ever happened. She smiled at Camille's exaggerated stories and laughed at Tiffany's lame puns. She even cleaned up the crumbled chips she'd spilled, joking to Betty Jo that she wasn't usually such a klutz.

Heather had a great time with everyone—except me. She wouldn't talk, look, or even sit near me.

Major cold-shoulder treatment.

And I thought miserably, *I finally know what it feels like to be invisible.*

* * *

I had trouble falling asleep. Giggles, whispers, and low snores echoed around the room. Next to me, Diane and Betty Jo were sound asleep. But across the room, Camille, Tiffany, Judith, and Heather shared sleepover secrets.

But would Heather reveal the biggest secret of all?

I hoped not.

The giggles grew louder, and so did my fears. I covered my head with my pillow. This quieted the outside noises, but the noises inside my mind were still too loud to ignore.

I kept worrying about my sisters—both of them.

What was Heather planning to do? Would she ever speak to me again? Would we have to share a room in silence? I didn't care anymore if she was a slob. I'd fold her clothes, make her bed, and dust her shelves if only she would forgive me and promise to keep my ghost sister a secret.

I tossed, turned, and trembled.

Sleep came slowly. Finally, I drifted off, but not into peaceful slumber. Instead, I was tormented by dark dreams that swirled into even darker nightmares.

I was being chased by a shadow ghost.

He had no face, but I recognized his voice. He was the boy from Scorpio Street. And this time, the name he called was mine.

"Miranda, Miranda, Miranda."

"Leave me alone!" I cried, running and yet going nowhere.

"I can't do that. I grow tired of waiting."

"Go back to the shadows!"

"Soon . . . but not alone."

Everything grew thick with gray fog. I couldn't open

my eyes, and yet I could see clearly. The shadow boy shifted, changed, and a new shape swirled in his place. A woman with her hand outstretched. I knew her immediately.

"Grammy Tammy!" I cried happily. "I'm so glad you're here. Now you can help."

"I can do nothing," she answered sadly. "You were careless. You betrayed Ghostland. Heather is not bound by a twin like you. She cannot be trusted to remain silent."

"But I didn't mean for Heather to see Melody. No one else will find out. I promise!"

"That's a promise you can't make. I tried to warn you, but you ignored my words." Grammy pointed and towered over me like a menacing dark cloud.

"I'll do whatever you say!" I sobbed. "Just don't let anything bad happen to Melody. Where is she? I have to find her."

"No one can find her. She's been banished to a forgotten house. The Melody we loved is gone forever. It's too late . . . too late . . . too late . . ."

These words thundered in my head, and suddenly my eyes jerked open, and I realized I had been dreaming.

Or was it a dream?

Maybe it was a warning.

Was it already too late to save my twin?

I tried to talk to Heather the following morning, but she continued to ignore me. She hung around Betty Jo and Tiffany, making it impossible to talk with her alone. At least she hadn't told anyone there'd been a ghost at the sleepover.

Safe . . . so far.

But for how long?

I couldn't forget my scary dream, and I was worried. I had to stop Heather from blabbing about Ghostland.

Since I was co-hostess of the sleepover, I stayed afterward to help Diane clean up. Unfortunately, Heather left an hour before I did.

When I finally reached my home, I headed straight for my bedroom. Heather had avoided me long enough. In our small room, she would have to talk to me. Or else!

I opened the door and turned on the ceiling light.

"Heather," I called, stubbing my foot against a tube-shaped metal car part.

"No. Guess again," Melody said, appearing suddenly over Heather's waterbed wearing a banana-yellow and green pants suit.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as I sat on my own bed.

"The same as you. Hoping to talk with Heather. Twenty minutes ago she was playing soccer at the schoolyard with her brothers. I zapped in some popcorn and watched from a tree. Cool game."

"But did you get a chance to talk to Heather?"

Melody frowned. "No luck. I got interested in the game and suddenly realized Heather had left. I quickly zapped in here, and found you."

I squashed my pillow and groaned. "You lost her! But what if she tells someone about Ghostland . . . if she already hasn't!"

"Maybe she won't. I mean, who would believe her?" Melody waved her arms, spinning up in the air and smiling confidently. "I think we can relax and trust her to keep quiet."

I propped my elbows against the pillow and rested my chin in my palms. "I hope so. I had the worst dream about your turning into a shadow ghost. If Heather doesn't blab and you leave by Friday night, you'll be safe."

Melody floated to the other side of the wall, by my dresser mirror that showed an eerie double vision of her. She shook her red curls and said, "Safe is borring! Besides, I don't believe I'll be banished to the shadows. Grammy was just trying to scare me."

"No, she wasn't! Shadow ghosts *are* real. I saw one and you can see him too if you'll come with me to 31 Scorpio Street."

She shook her auburn curls. "No."

"Why not? Are you afraid of the truth?"

"The only thing I'm afraid of is missing your birthday party. Which is why I've decided to stay here until Saturday . . . or even longer," she added, her mouth set stubbornly.

"Melody! Be reasonable! Your earth pass expires at midnight Friday."

"I told you I like to take risks."

"Please, don't risk your life—again!"

"What life?" she retorted. "All a good little ghost is supposed to care about is learning. Intellectual growth they call it. Phooey! I want to have fun."

"Magic lessons with Houdini and dancing with Elvis sounds like lots of fun. Your schooling is so exciting."

"You really think so?" She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Cloud-hopping tournaments and flying races are okay. There *are* lots of things I like about Ghostland. Especially my friends and family. I have to admit, I even miss Grammy."

"I'd miss Mom if I ever ran away."

"I bet you wouldn't miss Heather," Melody teased.

I hesitated, looking at piles of clothes, car models, and trophies. My stepsister was a slob . . . but she was also my friend. Or she used to be, before Melody and I scared her.

"As crazy as it sounds, I *would* miss Heather. I understand her better than ever, and I really like her. I wish she wasn't mad at me."

"At us," Melody corrected. She floated down until she sat next to me on my bed. "Running away seemed like such an exciting adventure at first, but instead I've caused trouble for Heather, Grammy, and you."

"You're the one who's in serious trouble," I said gravely. "Let me prove to you that shadow ghosts are real. Come with me to Scorpio Street."

"Now?" she asked in a shaky voice.

I nodded solemnly.

"I'm not afraid of anything," Melody insisted, taking my warm hand in her cool one. "And I'll prove it to *you* by going to Scorpio Street. Hold on and I'll zap us there."

I dug my fingers into Melody's chilly skin and closed my eyes. I felt tingly all over, dizzy, and suddenly I stood next to my twin in front of the spooky house at 31 Scorpio Street.

Even in the daylight, the towering gray house looked frightening. A rickety chained fence surrounded a large front yard. And dark shadows lurked around overgrown bushes and under sprawling trees.

Did any of these shadows have a voice, a past, and a soul?

"I don't see anything. Let's go," Melody said cheerfully.

"Not so quick," I said, wishing that I could give in to my growing fears and leave. But I had to be the strong twin this time. "We should check the yard."

Her green eyes widened. "You mean . . . go in there?"

"I thought you weren't afraid of anything," I reminded with a smile.

"I'm not! It's just that—" She squealed and pointed toward a patch of berry bushes. "Something moved!"

My heart lurched, and I followed Melody's gaze. Relief filled me as I made out a small silvery shape and blue eyes. "It's just a Siamese cat."

"I knew that," Melody snapped, obviously embarrassed by her fear. She stepped closer, walking through the broken gate, and looking around. She gestured to a willow tree. "The cat went behind there. He's the only thing casting shadows around here. Can't you tell the difference between a cat and a shadow ghost?"

"Do I look like a cat?" a low voice whispered.

Gray fog oozed from the willow tree, and I could make out a humanlike shape. The boy ghost! But he was barely formed, as wispy as a puff of smoke. Maybe his energy was weak during the day.

Melody's jaw dropped and she cried out, "He's real! Yikes! He's not a fairy tale!"

"Welcome, Melody," the boy ghost stated. "I sensed you would come."

"You . . . you're really a shadow ghost!" she exclaimed.

"Not by choice," he said bitterly. "You will be like me soon."

"No way!"

The boy ghost laughed eerily. "Hiding from the truth cannot make it go away. I may be trapped here, but I know many things. You have broken Ghostland rules. And you will be punished. There is already a dark empty house waiting . . . waiting for you, Melody."

"Forget it! And you can slink back in the shadows with that blue-eyed cat," she retorted. Then she grabbed my hand and turned toward me. "I've seen enough, Miranda. Let's go now."

My whole body quaked with worry and fear. "You read my mind. Hurry and get us out of here."

I was still shaking when we zapped back in my bedroom.

"It feels good to be home," I said, sinking against my soft, safe bedspread. I reached for my stuffed elephant and hugged him to my chest. I never wanted to meet a shadow ghost again!

"You were right, Miranda," Melody said, hugging herself and scooting next to me. "That shadow ghost was *too* real. And he seemed so bitter and lonely. I never want to be like him."

"You don't have to be. It's not too late for you."

"Am I ever glad!" She flashed me a nervous smile. "Maybe if I follow Ghostland rules and study really hard, I can visit you more often. Good ghosts earn lots of earth passes."

"That'd be great."

She nodded soberly. "Although I really wanted to spend our birthday together, I realize now that you were right. I won't let my pass expire." She shuddered and I knew she was thinking of the shadow ghost. "It's risky."

"Very risky," I agreed.

"So I'll go back tomorrow night. Just like you wanted." She gave a long, sad sigh. "You win, Miranda."

"Win?" I echoed, sudden tears springing to my eyes.

And I thought sadly, *If I've won, then why do I feel like I've lost?*

Twelve

One problem still remained: Heather. We needed to convince her to keep Ghostland a secret. So Melody and I zapped us back to the schoolyard to look for her. Adam, Davey, and Eddie still chased and kicked a soccer ball with their friends—minus Heather.

I couldn't think of anywhere else to search. Melody and I were both discouraged, but there was nothing else we could do—except enjoy the two days we had left together.

So Melody floated us up to a tree, zapped in some buttered popcorn, and we both stayed to watch the rest of the soccer game.

I was proud of myself for overcoming my fear of heights to sit in a tree. I reached for a huge handful of hot popcorn and teased, "Now this is truly a bird's eye view!"

Melody grinned. "Right-o! Best seat around."

"You said it! No big hairdo's or hats to block our way."

We giggled, and continued watching.

My stepbrothers were really good! I cheered and clapped when Eddie blocked a kick, Davey scored two goals, and little Adam volleyed the ball with his head. Of course they couldn't hear me, although a nearby squirrel looked startled.

The teams ended with a tie score of 5 to 5. No losers; everyone's a winner. What a super game!

"Now what do you want to do?" I asked my twin, holding tightly to a branch so I wouldn't fall. Of course, if I fell, ghostly magic would keep me safe.

"Something exciting!" Her green eyes sparkled. "I know! Let's go bike riding!"

"You call that exciting? I ride my bike all the time and it's no big thrill."

"I bet you think cloud hopping is exciting."

"Sure!" I exclaimed, envisioning bouncing like the wind from cloud to cloud.

Melody snorted. "Well, I cloud hop all the time and it's no big thrill."

We met each other's gaze, and burst into laughter.

"All right. I get the idea," I said, grinning. "Let's get down from here and go bike riding."

A bicycle pedaling by itself would cause traffic jams or heart attacks. So we decided to ride together. Melody perched invisibly on my handlebars and away we went! It was the best bike ride of my life!

After a while my stomach rumbled, reminding me it was lunchtime. I hated to leave, but Mom would get suspicious if I skipped lunch. Besides, if Heather was there, I could finally talk to her.

Melody said she was going to visit Jeremy one last time, and promptly vanished. So I headed for my house,

hoping and fearing a confrontation with Heather. But she wasn't there.

Mom explained that Heather decided to spend the night at Aunt Mary's, and wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

"Tomorrow!" I exclaimed, sinking into a kitchen chair.

"I had no idea you'd be so upset," Mom said with an amused smile as she spread mayonnaise on wheat bread. "Can't you survive without her for one day?"

"But I need Heather! I have to talk with her before she . . . I just have to talk with her. Maybe I can call—"

"Won't work. She and Aunt Mary are having a full day of shopping, dinner, and going to a wrestling match." Mom's eyes twinkled. "I'm glad you and your stepsister are getting along so well. But you have other friends. Visit one of them if you're bored."

"I'm not bored!" I clenched my fists in frustration. Who knew how many people Heather had already told about Ghostland? Which could get Melody in major trouble!

"Miranda, what's wrong?" Mom asked, raising her brows in concern. "Are you coming down with something? You look flushed."

"I'm fine, Mom. I haven't had a cold in months."

"I suppose I'm being overprotective again. And I promised Don I'd loosen up." She paused and added mysteriously, "I also promised him I wouldn't tell anyone about our wonderful surprise."

"What kind of surprise? It is for my birthday?" I asked eagerly. The last time Mom used that tone was when she told me she and Don were getting married.

She pretended to zip her lips. "I'm bound by secrecy

to reveal nothing . . . yet. But it's something very special for the whole family. You're going to be so thrilled.''

''Give me a hint?'' I persisted, shifting my feet back and forth.

''I'm not saying another word. It's a secret. Now here, eat your lunch,'' she said, handing me a turkey sandwich. ''I've got a half dozen more sandwiches to make. I think I hear the sound of hungry boys approaching.''

I knew there was no point bugging Mom. She clearly wasn't going to tell me about her secret. Still, I wondered what it was. A family trip? A new car? Or maybe we won the lottery!

I was glad to have something new to think about.

As I ate my sandwich, I daydreamed about surfing in Hawaii, cruising down the street in a new car, or holding millions of dollars in my arms. And for a short time, I didn't worry about my two sisters.

Reality returned the next day . . . along with Heather.

I'd been having fun with Melody: playing games, talking, and zooming above treetops on our last purple pony flight. Our time together was almost over, and we wanted to enjoy every minute of it. We were in my bedroom when we glanced out the window and saw Aunt Mary drop Heather off.

Melody and I stared at each other—my fear mirrored in her green eyes. No more waiting, wondering, and worrying. Now I would find out what Heather planned to do.

Melody zapped invisible, and we hurried into the living room.

We arrived just as Heather was walking in. She car-

ried her duffel bag in one hand and a shopping bag in the other. She dropped the duffel in a chair and greeted her father with a high-five hand slap. Mom came forward and hugged her. The boys crowded around, demanding to know what was in Heather's shopping bag. But she shook her head, refusing to answer.

Then she looked my way, and her expression tensed.

"Hi, Heather," I said, uneasily.

"Hi," she replied in a flat tone. Mom and Donovan stepped back and Heather brushed past her brothers.

She walked over to me.

I pushed back my hair, winding a curl around my finger, while I studied her expression. No frown, no smile, nothing. I couldn't tell if she was my friend or foe. "Uh, so you went to Aunt Mary's. Anything interesting happen there?"

She shrugged. "Not much."

"Oh? Well, can we talk privately?" I put my hand on her arm. "About you-know-who."

"Is she here?" Heather glanced around.

I nodded. "She wants to talk to you, too."

Heather looked uncertain, then she shook her head. "Not now. I got things to do first. I'm going to our room and I don't want to be disturbed for an hour."

"What things?" I squawked.

"Personal stuff. And you-know-who had better not spy on me. Or else!" Then she swept past, and headed down the hallway.

"Wait!" I called out, hurrying after her. "Heather!"

She slipped inside our bedroom and the door slammed in my face. I grabbed the knob, jiggled it, but the door was locked.

What was going on?

If I'd been worried before, I was doubly worried now. Heather was not acting like a friend. She was plotting against me—I was sure of it! And a sick feeling grew in my stomach. What if Heather had already spread the word that ghosts were real? Maybe she called the newspaper? I could imagine the headline, GHOSTS UNMASKED BY SIXTH GRADER.

And Ghostland guards would blame Melody!

"Want me to zap inside?" Melody asked, appearing beside me.

"No. We'd better give Heather her hour . . . but not a minute longer."

Melody reluctantly agreed, and we waited in the backyard.

Time passed slowly.

My worries increased, and I could sense Melody felt the same way. She didn't admit it, but I knew she was afraid of becoming a shadow ghost. And I was afraid for her.

Fifty-two minutes had gone by, when suddenly the back door opened and there stood Heather.

"You can come in now," she said, a strange gleam in her blue eyes. "Both of you."

I heard Melody gasp. Then she whispered nervously, "This has to be some kind of trick."

"Maybe. Let's find out."

"Okay, but I'll stay invisible."

We left the backyard and walked through the family room, past the kitchen, and down the hallway.

Cautiously, I stepped into my bedroom—

"Ohmygosh!" I gasped.

"Ohmygosh!" Melody echoed, becoming visible beside me.

I just stared, unable to believe what I was seeing. Heather had given the room a makeover. She'd cleaned the floor, rearranged the furniture, and decorated the walls with balloons, bright ribbons, and a streamer that spelled out "Happy Birthday!"

"Surprise!" Heather exclaimed, shutting the door behind us. She grinned. "It was hard work, but I did it!"

"It's wonderful!" I exclaimed, happy that my belongings were now taking up a full half of the room. "Everything is so neat and pretty. You even cleaned off your shelves!"

"I cleaned them off for *you*." She pointed to a row of shelves next to my dresser. Except for a birthday cake and a few wrapped presents, it was empty. "I thought you might like it for your glass figures."

"You're giving me these shelves?" I was so shocked, I couldn't breathe.

"You want them, don't you?"

"Oh, I do! Thank you, Heather! But I don't understand. Why are you giving me a party a day early?"

"The shelves are my present for you." She flashed a crooked smile at Melody. "But this birthday party is my gift for Melody."

Melody's jaw sagged. "For *me?* I don't get it. I've played tricks on you. Why would you do this for me?"

Heather sat on her bed. "Yesterday after playing soccer with the boys, I came in here to switch soccer shoes. But the room was a mess and I had to dig in my closet for them. That's when you two came in looking for *me*. But I was still mad and didn't want to talk to you. So instead, I stayed in the closet and listened."

"You didn't!" I burst out, horrified.

"Boy, did I get an earful. All that stuff about shadow

ghosts was creepy.'' She turned toward me and shuddered. ''But I was thrilled to hear you say you liked me. That you would actually miss me if you ran away! And Melody sounded so sad about leaving before your birthday party, that I decided to give her one myself.''

Melody floated up to a bunch of balloons and playfully punched them. ''This is the best party ever! Decorations, a cake, and even presents.'' She breezed over and looked at the wrapped gifts. ''There's even one for me! Can I open it now?''

Heather laughed. ''Sure. Miranda can open hers, too.''

Melody already had the bow off and paper torn. She laughed and held up her present; a book titled *Ghost Jokes*.

''I knew you loved pranks, so I thought a joke book would be perfect for you.''

''It is! Oh, how fun!'' She flipped open the book and asked, ''What did the ghost throw away, but it kept coming back?''

Heather giggled. ''I don't know.''

I shook my head and shrugged. ''Me neither.''

Melody turned the page and answered, ''A *boo*-merang!''

I wasn't sure whether to groan or laugh at the pun.

My twin spun a pirouette in the air. ''I just love birthdays! Thank you, Heather! And I promise I'll never play another prank on you!''

I smiled at this promise and wondered if my wild twin would be able to keep it. Pranks were as much a part of her personality as magic. I noticed that Heather was smiling, too.

Next it was my turn to unwrap a present. Heather's

gift to me was also perfect: a lovely glass figurine of a kitten similar to the one that had broken. I admired it, thanked Heather, then carefully placed it on my shelf.

For the next few hours, we three sisters had a wonderful time sharing jokes and giggling.

When Mom checked on us, Melody quickly vanished. Mom looked around at the room with astonishment. Although she was puzzled by Heather's birthday surprise, she was so impressed she gave us permission to stay up till midnight—as long as we were quiet.

But Heather was so exhausted from cleaning and moving furniture that she was sound asleep at eleven-thirty.

And at 11:55, Melody announced that she had ghost bumps. "Someone is coming," she whispered.

Right then, Grammy Tammy popped in. She wore a snug miniskirt, neon shirt, and her snowy hair was twisted in a French braid.

Grammy floated over to Melody and held out her hand. "Are you coming with me?"

"Yes," my twin replied, warmly grasping Grammy's hand. "It's been a wonderful week, but I'm ready to go home."

I lifted my hand to wave, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to say good-bye.

Melody met my gaze and gave me a sad smile. She knew what I was feeling and I knew what she was feeling. We were twins, and we could always be connected.

"Good-bye, Grammy. Good-bye, Melody," I whispered.

And then they were gone.

Thirteen

I gave up trying to sleep in, and opened my eyes. Someone in the house was listening to an oldies radio station. Probably Mom, she loved that kind of music. But did she have to listen so loud? Oldies were okay, but the words to that rock and roll song reminded me that Melody was gone—again. Which made *me* feel like crying, even though I didn't want to. . . .

Today I am twelve, I thought as I sat up in bed and stretched. *And so is Melody.*

I sighed and glanced to see if Heather was up yet. No. Her covers were tangled around her and there was already a pile of discarded clothes on the floor.

There was a tap on my door and Mom called, "Wake up, girls!"

"Who can sleep through that loud music?" I grumbled.

Mom peeked her head through the doorway and grinned. "Thought that might wake you up. It's after nine and the rest of us are tired of waiting."

"Waiting for what?" I stepped out of bed and opened

my drawers. I took out my favorite lavender T-shirt with the cat design and a pair of black jeans.

"Yeah," added a low voice from the other side of the room. Heather was finally awake. "What's everyone waiting for?"

"For you girls," Mom answered.

"But my party's not till two," I pointed out. I slipped the T-shirt over my head and a sudden thought struck me. "Mom! Is this about your surprise?"

Mom pushed her light-brown hair from her face and nodded. "How'd you guess?"

I stuck my feet in my jeans, hopping into them like a frog. "Wow! You're finally going to tell us!"

Heather peeked her mussed blond head from her covers. "What are you so excited about? What surprise?"

"The big family surprise," I exclaimed. "Mom, what is it? Are we getting a new car? Going on a trip? Did we win a million-dollar lottery?"

Mom's hazel eyes crinkled up as she laughed. "I'm not telling . . . yet. Get dressed and come into the family room. Then Donovan and I will share our surprise."

As I followed Heather into the family room, I found myself thinking about Melody again. She hadn't been gone twelve hours, and I already missed her. I couldn't write, call, or zap over to Ghostland to visit her, either. I had to wait for her to earn an earth pass—which could take weeks, months, *years!*

But all thoughts of Melody vanished from my mind when I heard Mom and Donovan's big surprise.

They had bought a new house. We were going to move!

And the best part was that each of us kids would have our own bedroom! Super!

Heather's blue eyes widened, but she just shrugged. "I finally clean up my room, and now we're moving."

"When can we see the house?" Davey asked, tugging on Donovan's shirt sleeve.

"We don't have the key yet, but we can drive by. We can go there now," Mom said proudly.

"Is it far?" Heather asked, leaning forward on the couch.

"Nope," Donovan replied. "In fact, you've probably seen it before. It's about a mile from here in a peaceful older neighborhood. I still can't believe the good deal we got on this house. The address is 31 Scorpio Street."

I gasped.

Heather looked at me. "Isn't that . . . ?"

I nodded, barely able to breathe.

We were going to live in that scary, spooky house on Scorpio Street!

But a shadow ghost already lived there!

I hoped Melody earned another earth pass *soon,* because I had a feeling I was really going to need her ghostly help—with the shadow boy.

If you enjoyed the adventures
of Miranda and Melody, then
check out the following selection from
TEACHER TROUBLE
the next fun-loving story in the
My Sister, The Ghost Series,
coming in January 1996
from Avon Camelot.

"Is our house really haunted?" Heather asked, tucking her pencil behind her ear and lifting her gaze from her homework.

I pushed my spelling list aside and looked across the table at my stepsister. With sunshine streaming in from the window behind her, filling the family room with warmth and light, it was hard to imagine spooks and spirits—but they were real.

Too real.

"Yes, it's haunted," I answered in a hushed, uneasy tone. I glanced around, half expecting to see a dark misty shape. "A boy shadow ghost lives here."

Heather raised her brows skeptically. "The only weird thing I've seen is a stray cat with bright blue eyes."

"I think the cat belongs to *him.* It's probably a ghost, too."

"It looked real to me. More real than this shadow boy I've never seen. I'm beginning to think you made him up. We moved into this so-called haunted house

two weeks ago and I haven't seen any sign of a ghost.'' She paused and grinned. ''Not even your spooky twin.''

''Shhh!'' I exclaimed, putting my finger to my lips. ''You promised not to talk about Melody. No one else must ever find out about Ghostland. You're the only one in the family who knows I have a ghost sister.''

Heather pushed her blond hair from her forehead and teased, ''And I would think you made Melody up, too, if I hadn't seen her with my own eyes.''

I smiled, remembering how scared Heather had been when she'd first met Melody—and Heather wasn't scared easily. She used to be a rough-and-tough bully who bossed me around and took my lunch money daily. But that had changed when Melody zapped into my life last October. A bit of hocus-pocus and some understanding, and presto-chango! Heather was my stepsister—*and my friend.*

Thinking about Melody made me miss her. I hadn't seen her since our shared April birthday, and it was now late May. Over a month apart! How long would it take before my ghostly sister earned another earth pass so she could visit me?

Sighing, I glanced at my watch. Six-thirty. Soon Mom would be calling us for dinner.

I reached for my paper and told Heather, ''Let's finish our homework or we'll both be haunted by bad grades.''

Heather groaned and tapped the eraser-end of her pencil against the wooden table. ''I'd rather search for the shadow ghost. I'm a wreck at spelling. I can't even pronounce this word—p-e-c-u- . . . Huh? What is it?''

''Peculiar,'' I answered promptly. Poor Heather. She

was barely passing sixth grade. I couldn't figure out why someone who could take apart a car and put it back together blindfolded couldn't spell simple words. I didn't know anything about cars, but I was an A student. Spelling was my best subject. "Peculiar means weird or unusual."

"Oh, I get it," Heather said, flashing her lopsided smile. "Like, Miss Wynde is peculiar."

"That's right," I agreed, giggling.

Augusta Wynde, our sixth grade teacher, was *very* peculiar. She always wore black suits and spoke in a strange, husky voice that became shrill when she got excited. And the one subject that excited her was ghosts. She was very interested in supernatural things and hoped to prove to the world that ghosts were real. Of course, I hoped she'd never succeed.

Ghostland must remain a secret.

"Miss Wynde is an okay teacher," I said, skimming through my spelling words one last time, then putting my pencil in a plastic zipper pouch and closing my binder. "She's a little weird—"

"A lot weird," Heather put in firmly. "And you only like her because you're the teacher's pet. Perfect Miranda. You turn in your homework on time—or early!—and earn perfect grades. She loves you and she hates me."

"If you cared as much about homework as you do about cars, you could be a good student, too."

Heather narrowed her blue eyes. "I'm studying now, aren't I?"

I pointed to her paper. "You've only written your words once. You're supposed to write them three times.

I think you're talking so you won't have to do your homework. That's why you keep—''

Heather screamed and jumped up from the table.

''Miranda!'' she cried, pointing at the window. ''I think I just saw the shadow ghost!''

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